

Chroma

A QUEER LITERARY JOURNAL

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04

1.
In Morocco, suddenly I wasn't an Arab any more, I don't know how it happened. It was just after my Catholic grandmother died. The last time I saw her, I remember she got angry with me for not dropping the *h* from my name like my father – that *h* like a yellow star, a yellow crescent. “With a face like yours, you look foreign enough already.” My grandmother had spent the war working the black market. She'd never even heard of the resistance, the Nazi persecutions, the death camps, until the late 1950s. She suffered a sort of belated terror, which, in the thirty years that followed, mutated into a horror of anything which might draw attention to her grandchildren, anything that might mark them out as targets for racial hatred. I don't want to speak ill of the dead, but there are times when I think she could just as easily have gone the other way. Before the war, she'd been a strong, red-blooded woman. She had never given much thought to politics. She worked as a nurse in a psychiatric hospital and by the end of the war she was a Ward Sister. In the old black and white photographs of her wearing her uniform, there's a certain hardness about her, as there often is about people who work with *human things*. She called her patients “loonies”. To her, she was a prison warder, no more, no less.

I phoned my mother today. They just got back from Martinique a couple of days ago. They loved it. My mother says they're so tanned that Yehia, my father, looks like a *real wog*. I don't rise to the bait. They're down the country right now, staying in the little house where my grandmother died. I ask my mother if they've looked over the interview questions – it's the only thing I care about. I'm a bit surprised when she says, “Yes, *we're all finished*.”

“What do you mean *all finished*?” I say through gritted teeth. “Finished what?”

She seems a little embarrassed, but she plays the innocent. It was just the Algerian period I was interested in, wasn't it, she says, because if it was, it didn't amount to much, just a couple of pages, and, well, that was it, Yehia didn't have much to say about it,

but anyway, we'll see.

“What do you mean he didn't have much to say?” I ask, a little panicked, “He didn't mention anything ... *special*?”

“Do you mean about sex?”

“No!” I yelled. “No, I mean about the TORTURE.”

I don't know why, but whenever I try to say something loving, I end up being insulting – a bit like the fable of the two sisters who vomit toads instead of pearls. Instead of getting involved when my Catholic grandmother died, I just withdrew and scowled my Arab scowl. I never really made any attempt to understand who she really was and why. Her money, what little she left, my mother wanted us to make the most of. I decided to use mine to finance an Arab trip. I didn't really know what that meant at the time, it was just my way of disowning her, even in her grave. I started out with some stupid idea of *going back to my roots*, as though my mother, my grandmother, the fact that I had been born in France were superfluous, nothing more than useless additions. When I told my mother a couple of months ago about the book I was writing, she said my father would be really proud. It was like she were standing on the sidelines, like what I was doing automatically excluded her. I realised afterwards that it was the cruellest thing a son could do, I realised that I was rejecting her past, her role, and still I didn't reassure her, didn't let her know she mattered.

2.

I had just turned twenty-three when I started paying for it. In a sense I was paying to give someone else pleasure. It's a state of mind. The first time was a rent boy at the *Gare du Nord* who reminded me of someone I'd had a platonic crush on a year before. I put fifty francs in small change into his black hand. He wanted to give me a blow job; I was shocked that he really seemed to want to do something for me, as if it was important that we be quits. I think I had been hoping I would feel ripped off. Then there was the young sailor in Essaouira. I'd only been there about six hours. I'd just woken up and gone for a walk

along the beach when this boy of about sixteen or seventeen comes up to me – *comes on to me*. He walks on ahead and motions for me to follow. We wind up in a sort of wasteland just outside the town. He seems really nervous someone will see us. He drops his pants. I stroke his chest, which seems to disconcert him. When I let my hand move downward, he nods. As soon as he's hard, he takes control. He pushes me onto the ground, and takes me roughly. He comes quickly and stands up. He wipes the sand from my face and then demands *argent*. Actually, he's taken me by surprise. I haven't had time to change any money. I shake my head. For about ten seconds he mimes being angry, then shrugs his shoulders and takes my pack of Marlboro. He's about to leave when he changes his mind and offers me a cigarette.

In Morocco, suddenly I wasn't an Arab any more, or was it here in actual fact that things were finally settled? Was it in Morocco that I was forced to give up? Was it at that moment that the Spectre chose to appear and give me this long list of numbers? The Debt. The bottomless debt, the infinite debt that I would have to pay, giving myself to Arab men, giving my arse to bring disgrace on my family and my race. This debt which is mine because of my father Yehia, the war of independence, the forsaking of Arab soil, the tortured, mutilated penis; this debt which I contracted like a hereditary disease, this monstrous column of Arabic numbers which I both repay and renew every time I fuck a rent boy, every time I pay for the right to look at them, to *pleasure them*.

Tonight, in Pigalle, I run into Morad again. Times are tough. The old men who usually pay for it are bored of him, nobody's got any money. Morad is champing at the bit. He's desperate to smoke a little *kif*, but he's broke. We talk for a long time. I think he thinks of it as a kind of investment. But when he sees that things aren't going anywhere, that I can't make up my mind, that I haven't put my hand in my pocket even to buy him a coffee, he punches a door in a fit of temper. His beautiful smile disappears. I say simply: "Something wrong, Morad?" He lowers his eyes like a guilty child, submits to the sheer weight of his need, he sighs, he says: "Why is it so fucking hard for me to ask you for stuff?" I burst out laughing, I look into his eyes. It's easy for me now, because I'm not really interested any more. I say: "That's the point. *That's* what you give me. If you didn't find it hard, what exactly would you be giving me?"

3.
"Fucking hell, what does he take me for? He's lying!" I'm livid. I can hear my mother shrivel on the other end of the phone. She lowers her voice, afraid that Yehia will overhear. He's probably in the back yard or in their

tiny front garden. Or slumped in his armchair in the sitting room. She says: "I did ask him about the torture. Honestly. He says he knew about it, that he knew it was going on, but that he didn't actually see anything."

"What do you mean? What about the time a couple of years ago when he was in hospital? Do you remember what he said?"

"No, what?"

My mother sounds completely sincere, which only makes it worse. She could get me killed and she wouldn't even notice. She'd rather people thought I was crazy. But I didn't dream this up. My father was very ill. The night before his operation, we went to visit him in hospital. I told him: "I'm thinking of writing a book about the war in Algeria. About your time in Algeria."

He groaned. "You're never going to let up about that, are you?" he said. "What do you want? What do you want me to say? You want me to say I stood by while they attached wires to some *fellah's* prick and flipped the switch?" I remember my mother letting out a soft, horrified whimper. After that, no-one said anything.

4.

All the Arabs I touch become transparent. It's a curse. These days even Abdel only shows up like a ghost from time to time. A ghostly debtor. A ghost demanding satisfaction. Today, he turned up unannounced, three knocks at the door, like fate. I hadn't seen him for three months. Abdel is a ravenous ghost. He takes what he's owed in food. He eats. While I'm whipping up lunch, he goes into the sitting room looking for stuff to steal. I think of him as Abdel "la Marabounta". My mother uses the word to describe a party of guests. To her, it's a term of affection, something joyful that means to share, to celebrate, to overindulge. In fact, Marabounta refers to an army of ants devouring everything in their path. Abdel is starving – in the literal sense of the word. This is how the Debt appears, emaciated, voracious. Abdel eats quickly, never pauses even for a second. I watch him, appalled. He's skin and bone. These days, his face is a knife that matches his classical nose. There's hardly enough of him to fill his clothes – his body is just a slender repository for his cock – it makes him seem cutting, more vulnerable and therefore more attractive. And yet I know the Marabounta advances and ravages all in its path.

5.

At the end of my stay in Essaouira, I bumped into the young sailor again. I was walking back from the dunes at the far end of the beach. I was exhausted. The strong wind made me groggy. I see him as I'm passing the gate in the city wall. He spots me, too, so I have to go over and say hello. Unlike our first meeting, he's all smiles, he seems happy to see me. I notice that his

shoes are falling apart, peeling away like a second skin. He wants to talk. He tells me he usually works on one of the fishing boats, that he likes Western music. At some point, a little boy comes up to us. The sailor talks to him as though it's his little brother, kisses him on the cheek, and the kid wanders off. I feel awkward. I need to get back to the hotel for dinner. I'm meeting someone afterwards in a café. I put my hand in my pocket and try to give the teenage sailor the money he wanted the first time, the money I didn't have. He looks surprised, slightly offended. He won't take the money. I have to put it back in my pocket, something that pisses me off. Then he looks at me, horny, and points to the dunes at the far end of the beach.

In Morocco, suddenly I wasn't an Arab any more. As soon as my foot touched the ground, as soon as my ear became attuned to the language, as soon as my eyes adjusted to the distinctive light, I realised that *I used to be an Arab*, now I was nothing, nothing but a man in debt, nothing but a bastard with a debt to pay. I knew what I had to do. I dropped my pants. I became

a usurer of Arab cock. I turned the debt around, I lay down on the ground like a victim, mimicking the agony, the pain, the terrible shame, but all the while I had one eye half-open, one demonic eye, watching as the column of numbers is reversed, offering a devalued currency that can never be spent. Where was the pleasure? Who was giving, who was taking? *I used to be an Arab*. Now I was The Debt, that's my name now, the debt which some Arab – maybe that Arab, maybe my father before he watched that Arab die – contracts like an illness, a debt he can contract but never *repay*. I don't want the Marabounta to repay me. I want him to *want* to repay me without ever having the *means*, I want them to pay the ransom by humiliating me, I want Arabs to fuck me – endlessly – to possess me – endlessly – and I never want us to be quits. Ever. Because if we were, then what? ■

translated by Frank Wynne
with special thanks to Hervé Ferrage at
frenchbooknews.com

06

Ailbhe Darcy

I Have Not Kissed You

with all the violence I should,
all the jealousy due
a more beautiful sister.

If we had been young together
we would not have been friends.
You had friends to spare, and I

would read alone on the hot grass
as you volleyed their serves, swung
the full weight of your hair.

In love with you like a boy
that summer, I'd carve your name
in the earth between blades, long

for something I couldn't name or resist:
violence, perhaps, or a kiss,
or you for a sister.

Maitreyabandhu

Birches

There is a poetry of violet
among the branches
that is part scribble, part light-float,
not moving;

hanging in pendants
of white-patch-black –
tree-trunks that are stem
and, incidentally, memory;

a boundary between our long garden
and the rest of everything;
so that I always thought
we were the only family

in the whole town
to own silver birches –
six sky-climbers, glittering
above all the goings on,

of which the foremost was waiting
till he came – at five, at seven –
tall and quick, stooping
through the hole in the hedge,

the trees conspiring, holding
against the blackening garden
a tenderness of leaves;
and when I look at birches –

how they gather the mist into themselves –
I always come back to him
and what he felt before, and after, we met:
this difficult fragrance

– the creak of the tree-swing,
the tree-den, their standing now,
lined against the new buildings.

07

Judge's Comments

Mark Doty: "Birches" evokes, with scrupulous attention, the visual and auditory presence of a line of trees, literally turning them into writing: "part scribble, part light-float..." The sly introduction of a – lover? sexual partner? – into the poem suddenly revises our sense of what the trees mean to the speaker, as they become a complex figure for a powerful, memorable exchange.

Eva

Helena Lukowska

08

I don't know what it was about Eva. Her face reminded me of a girl I used to know called Jane. Jane and I went out for a few weeks though it never got to the "girlfriends" stage, if you ask me. I don't like being "girlfriends" with people. Whenever I'm in a relationship that lasts more than a couple of months and things start to annoy me about the other girl, I find myself wishing I was hetero just so we could be "boyfriend" and "girlfriend", at least in that sense we'd be distinct from each other. If you're one another's "girlfriend" it's like you're both the same, and that is a notion that makes me feel sick.

I liked Jane but was never especially attracted to her and never wanted to be. Jane was pretty-wholesome, and that turned me off. What I go for in people is dirt, their sins. Usually, that is. The point in our relationship when I realised Jane looked not unlike my mother was the point at which I realised it was over. Eva, despite looking like Jane, did not resemble my mum, at least not to the extent that it bothered me. Not to the extent that if we had ever gone out and I'd taken her home to meet my parents, my mum would've been freaked out. But then, I don't bring girls home.

Eva was wholesome to the core. Perhaps even more so than Jane, which is why I really didn't understand my attraction to her. I mean, she didn't even drink! How on earth would she and I communicate successfully? I, the girl who on the extremely rare occasion when I remain on the wagon for two days, rejoice on the third, because it means I can have a healthy, guilt-free vodka binge, conscience and brain cells intact.

Eva was a queer activist, artist and writer. Can I make it any more obvious? She and her friend Chris were two Canadians travelling around Europe, staying mostly in squats and recording their experiences through photos and journals. When I met them they were staying in a squat near the centre of Leeds.

I hang out with queer activists sometimes and frequent squats, but mostly only when some fun event is on. What I actually do is negligible. I mean the word "activist" does more than imply some sort of activity.

The only thing I actively do is drink and jabber. I'm not even active in bed. Not usually. Politics-wise, I can't decide whether my inactivity is down to fear, laziness, ambivalence or a combination of the three. Maybe I was drawn to Eva because she was a *real* activist, not just some thinly veiled liberal like myself. Perhaps the guts and determination and strength it takes to live your life not as part of the system, but to fight for what you believe in, counteracts the fact that your favourite film is *Better Than Chocolate*.

I've lived in York with my folks since returning from university five fucking years ago, but it seems I spend every second of my spare time in Leeds, which is understandable given that I'm twenty seven, my parents are parents and York is York. I should move out, I really should. It's not like I'm socially inept and couldn't find anyone to live with. It's not like I don't hate living at home under parental scrutiny when I'm pushing thirty. It's not like York isn't fucking boring. It's just that there's some unspecified defect within that always drags me back to "safety".

I need a safe base in which to hide, and no matter how maddening, dull and frustrating that base may be, I can't stop going back. I don't know if there's a real reason for it or if it's just habit. I feel like my life's a broken record. Maybe it was going to university in London for three years that shook me up and made me this way. That city swallowed me up, overwhelmed me, made me close my eyes and will everything to shrink again. And now that it has shrunk, I feel like I can't breathe. Still, there's feeling like you can't breathe and there's actually not being able to breathe. I made my choice and I don't get the panic attacks any more, or hardly ever, and if I do, at least I can go back home again.

I know my parents want me out of their hair, but I also know they're more scared of me leaving. They don't think I can make it out there on my own. They're right, of course, but whose fault is that. Huh? Who made me weak? I didn't ask to be born, etc, etc, cliché, cliché, teenager, teenager. Folk you. In truth, I'm glad I've got my parents to blame for this rut in which I am stuck. Who would I blame otherwise?

Myself? Now that just wouldn't do.

I had a few friends living in the Leeds squat of Eva visitation, including an old school friend who had introduced me to everyone in Leeds' vibrant queer-anarchist movement. I came round one night to the squat for an evening meal and porn films which my old school friend herself had directed. At school, everyone had thought she was stuck up, not that you don't get snooty porn directors, but she really wasn't. She was actually just painfully shy. It's sad, that miscomprehension, makes me think of those stories of deaf people who were misdiagnosed as mentally ill.

I liked visiting the squat, it was a really beautiful space, decorated well and full of friendly people of different genders, sexualities, nationalities. In it lived people from Germany, Somalia, France, Turkey and England. Well, the majority there were white and English, but still the amount of multiculturalism there fucked with my narrow preconceptions of squatting as a rather homogenised thing. People were all living together as a community and they seemed to get on relatively well. I'm not saying it was a utopia, but it was still pretty cool.

Where I used to live as a student was very multicultural. There was tolerance but there was no integration. I didn't talk to my neighbours for two years and they didn't talk to me. The house that adjoined to the left side of mine was that of an Asian family. The parents' bedroom was just through the wall of my bedroom. I could sometimes hear them shouting or talking, and there's no way they would never have heard my music. But they never complained and I never complained. We were pretty indifferent to each other, I think. I notice the indifference I felt towards them when I overhear my folks through my bedroom wall these days, I can pick out every word they're saying and it grates big time. I also notice when they tell me to turn my music down.

That night at the squat in Leeds was about a year ago. It has since been knocked down to build luxury flats for moneyed students and "young professionals". I just can't bring myself to write that phrase without inverted commas. Every squat in Leeds is torn down for this purpose. Someday, the whole of Leeds will be one big block of luxury flats.

The porn did little for me. This surprised me as I hadn't had sex in about seven months. Even more surprising was that Eva did do so much for me, because I hadn't been attracted to anyone in that long and I really didn't expect someone like Eva to be the one to break my dry spell. Eva talked to me at length about bike repairs, photography and children, three subjects in which I am completely disinterested, having no bike, camera or child and no particular desire for any of these things. Eva marvelled at the queer community in Leeds, misdirecting her compliments towards me. I did not deflect like I usually do but

grunted appreciatively when she praised me. I thought, fuck it, she's only here for a couple of weeks, let her believe I'm something I'm not. On the other hand, I sometimes wonder if the quality people find most attractive in me isn't self-deprecation. I can put myself down in such a way that others will laugh and not feel malicious in doing so. People seem to like that. When they stop laughing, I know I've got to the point where I am devoid of all charm and no longer any use. Maybe that's why my friend and I lost touch when she moved out of the squat. Maybe that's why Eva and I lost touch, though I really didn't think it got the chance to get to that point.

The night I met Eva, I felt fraudulent and awkward chugging my litre of cider for comfort, like a baby with its bottle. I kept not being sure whether I was attracted to Eva and not understanding what she might see in me, though it was apparent we were both into each other. I didn't know what to say to her about my life, everything I could remember doing in that moment seemed to involve getting wasted, or my dull-as-fuck job working as a till-monkey for an evil chain-store. I did not think she would be impressed, so I kept my mouth shut about me and asked her questions about her. I learnt from reading the book *High Fidelity* that a good way to chat people up is to ask them lots of questions about themselves. People love talking about themselves. I would imagine it'd say the same thing in *How To Make Friends and Influence People* but I honestly never read that book. I think it was specifically women in *High Fidelity*, women like talking about themselves, it said. But maybe that is a sexist, out-dated, binary notion. I wouldn't know, I never tried to chat a guy up, but I do know a lot of guys who like talking about themselves and not much else. Guys like me.

In truth, I'd already made up my mind about Eva, that she'd be judgmental towards me and that she'd be a shining example of what true purity and goodness really were and I would not measure up. Why did I even bother asking any questions? Why do I ever bother? The people I am attracted to always amount to pretty much the same thing in my head. Eva's hair flopped just below her ears. I wanted to stroke it.

I was relieved when Erik, who lived at the squat showed up at midnight pissed out of her skull and sat between Eva and myself. Erik proceeded to rant about how unerotic porn was. Erik is a gender queer who dislikes the terms hir and ze, most people still called her she even after she changed her name to Erik from whatever it was before. Pronounically, she had no preference. I liked the name Erik. I was surprised that that was the name she chose when she could've had any name in the world, but I liked it nonetheless. I wouldn't have minded calling myself Erik, but I'm kind of used to the name I've got, besides I don't just want to copy, I just think it'd suit

me better, is all.

I didn't, and still don't know Erik very well. In truth, I'm scared of knowing her very well, though I can see we have stuff in common, and whenever I talk to her I'm glad of it. I guess I'm scared that if we get too close she'd bring home to me my own hypocrisy, because pisshead and sex-fiend as Erik is, she still lives revolution, whereas I just think about it. I think Erik's a lot like I would be if I was less selfish, had more guts and strength of conviction and whatever the opposite of laziness is.

That night, Erik was talking about scientology and cheese and being quite funny. I drank more cider and talked with Erik and Eva till Erik went to bed at one. I was tired by now, and though me and Eva kept touching each other's arms and knees and talking in a gratuitously flirty fashion, I figured at 2am that if I didn't make a move on her in the next five minutes I would have to get my train or fall asleep here. It seemed so dumb going back to York that night, so much effort, but perhaps the tension and the not knowing would be more of an effort mentally. Plus I was scared. I had the words of Morrissey in my head, "then a strange fear gripped me and I just couldn't ask." The fear was not in fact strange, it was insecurity around my sexual abilities. What if I disappoint? She's probably fucked her way around the world twice by now. I've never even used a strap-on.

"I like your dress. Want a fuck?" is what I wanted to say. I know it's a terrible line, but it was a line from the porn film and I think she'd have laughed, if only out of politeness. But even if the tone was jokey, there'd be something serious underneath. And we'd both know. It'd be like the next level of Polari. It could have been good. What I actually said was, "I like your dress I've gotta go home now" just like that all one sentence. We hugged awkwardly, knowing intuitively that we were both deliberately holding back. What the fuck are *you* scared of, Eva, I thought, why do I always get attracted to people who are even more passive than me?

I did like her dress, but possibly just because it was a dress. I objectify femme girls, you see. I probably shouldn't be saying this, it's just the thought that they could be anywhere and everywhere, and you wouldn't know. I used to think only straight girls wore dresses, that all lesbians were butch. At one point, no amount of (über butch) LGBT youth workers could convince me otherwise. But the thought of a woman sat at a bus stop looking femme and hot, just going about her daily business, binary ignoramus like myself and most of the rest of the world checking her out with no inkling whatsoever that she still has the taste of girl spunk in her mouth because last night she was fucking with some bull dyke, turns me on. It turns me on that people don't understand what a woman like Eva could see in a dyke like me. It turns me on,

the whole heteronormative notion of beauty and ugliness, the whole gasp of incomprehension as a butch-femme couple get it on, and they say, "But she's just too pretty, what's she doing with *that*?"

I don't hang out in circles where such talk is distributed anymore, but society has always told me what a dyke is. It's someone like me. And another thing it has told me which I myself keep telling myself is, *you haven't got a fucking chance. Look at yourself.* I'm not into physical pain as a turn on, my masochism is all mental. Out-of-your-leaguiness is sexy. That's why I like femme girls. There is still this binary logical deposit in my mind that says they could never possibly really want me, even when they do. I think these thoughts in the lonely carriage, listen to my Walkman until the battery goes dead and I watch the distant lights of houses going by when I can make them out through the darkness. I love those lights.

A week later, a few days before Chris and Eva are due to leave, I go walking with them in Ilkley, along with Erik and a couple of her friends. They talk stuff mostly over my head. When I meet up with Eva again, I'm not sure whether I'm attracted to her or not. I keep trying to work out what it is about her I'm attracted to, I mean femmeness and not being an arsehole aren't enough, surely. Eva's quite good looking, but there's nothing remarkable about her, at least nothing I can put my finger on.

Back at the squat that night I am stone cold sober, not the ideal state for me to be in in order to have the confidence to make a move on a person. Then Eva asks if she can draw me in her sketchbook. It's such a cheesy request that I think, no way is *anything* going to happen between the two of us, *ever*. She keeps saying things that should really be putting me off, but aren't. I don't get it. I sit down awkwardly while she sets up her stuff. Eva decides to position me in order to "get a better picture." I think, fuck it, this is just too obvious, I'll regret it if I do nothing.

She touches my arm. I start to stroke her hair. And then we kiss. While we're kissing I wonder if this is the right thing to do, or whether this is going to be awkward and arid like the last time I slept with someone. I feel like a clumsy teenage boy whenever I sleep with a girl I've never slept with before. Rolling on the cold cold floor drenched in sweat and girl cum is enough to reassure me. That's when I realised I definitely did like her. We fucked the whole night save a few hours and the appropriate noises and involuntary movements of legs, thighs and cunt say it was more than okay. It'd be too cheesy to say exactly what we did, but it restored my wavering faith in lesbian sex is probably all that needs to be recounted.

Between fucking and a minimal amount of sleeping, we talk. When I first met Eva I worried about the differences between us, that we would be too dissimilar to make a connection. It's funny how post-fuck-

ing all those fears disappear. That's why I find it impossible to be close to a person until I've had sex with them. That said, I haven't had sex with that many people, and the majority of them I still don't feel close to. Maybe that's why one year on I'm still thinking about Eva. I was shattered after we fucked that night, shattered but glad to be awake and talking.

Next day is my mother's birthday so I have to go back to York. I don't mind. I need to collect my thoughts and reflect before I see this girl again. Eva and I hang out as long as we can before I have to get my train. We have breakfast together, we walk the streets talking. Eva's good to talk to, I feel like I can say the wrong thing and live with it. Forget what I said before, *that's* why I still think about Eva these days.

We kiss like teenagers at the train station and I can't shake my grin as I board the train. Two middle-aged women glare at me, I grin at them a grin of defiance and they look away. The rest of the passengers on the train are already looking at their feet as I board, like they're trying to send the message "don't bother" to a bus driver about to stop and pick them up. I look out the window at Eva, and they look up again. I feel like I'm worth something.

The family meal is painless. My brother and my dad talk to one another. My mother interjects now and again to give an opinion and my dad gives her an "isn't she sweet" look before telling her that her thinking is preposterous. It's subtle and seems benign the way some people grind you down. My dad doesn't even know he's doing it, my mum is used to it. Does she know? Or does she really believe she isn't as bright as him? Does she just not want to upset the equilibrium of marriage? Maybe she's happy. Maybe this is safe for her. I shouldn't judge. Apart from the usual pleasantries, I sit in silence. That is, until I start to drink. Then I try to stand up for my mum, a gesture she obviously does not appreciate, because when dad knocks me down, she laughs along.

My dad tells me the way he sees the world, he tells us all the way he sees the world. Except he thinks it's the truth. He's read enough and heard enough to believe in something, to be convinced, but no one can read and hear and see everything, not even a fraction of a fraction of everything. It's like Kimya Dawson says, "I am just a spec of dust inside a giant's eye." Does Dad know this? I used to be convinced of stuff at a younger age, but not anymore. I know my dad wishes I was more like my brother. Dad thinks I'm a Stalinist. This is ironic because I never think about Stalin except when I'm around him. In truth, I think it is my dad who is obsessed with Stalin. Maybe he's a secret Stalinist and he's ashamed and projecting. When we get onto politics it always comes back to Stalin. I could just say "I'm not a Stalinist," but then I'm not going to say it just because he wants me to. I mean, what am I meant to

say when he lectures me about all the terrible things Stalin did? Am I meant to say, "What a bad man"? What's the point? It's like saying "Hitler was bad." I think there's far more value saying, "Churchill was a bad man" because this view is not encouraged. He's always trying to get me to get a better job, a career, not just a shitty job in a shop.

I don't blame him for wanting me to move out. It's the whole what-do-you-want-to-do-with-your-life that gets me. Well, Dad, I want to not feel like shit anymore, that'd be a good start, then maybe I wouldn't be too fucking scared to move out, but the chances of that happening with you around are pretty low. I don't say that. The words remain just under the surface, and on bad days all I can do is dream of ripping open my chest and letting my insides fall out. I can't even cry about it, I'm just frustrated, I'd rather be sad. My Dad used to say to me he was radical at Oxford because he was the only person there who aspired to be middle-class. I understand why. I guess I sully all his aspirations. Though having a left-wing lesbian daughter is quite a bourgeois thing. I should tell him that.

I drink lots of red wine during the meal. Whilst my dad is relating the infinite wisdom of a variety of dead white men I keep zoning out and thinking about fucking Eva. Tomorrow I get to see her again, I think. Like an actual date, how fucking weird is that gonna be? I'll want to drink, of course. I don't really know what the etiquette is for a drinker going on a date with a non-drinker. Do I still get to drink? In the end, I suggest a Hindu-run café where you're not allowed to drink anyway. Although I do have some black vodka concoction decanted into a plastic bottle in my bag, so if it goes badly I can numb my brain on the journey home. I'll probably drink it even if it goes well. My dad bought the vodka but readily shares it with me. I think he likes the fact that I drink vodka, it's one of the few common interests we share.

On the day of the date I head towards the train station as the rain descends in cold dirty sheets. I imagine scenes in my head. I imagine someone shouting "dykes" at me and Eva for being dykes, I imagine shouting "fuck you" at them. Being strong and tough, a hero. As I imagine all this I forget my surroundings and start to run, for some reason my imagination works better when I'm running. It's not the best idea, and suddenly I'm jolted back to reality by slipping on the ground. The last thing I think is, "you twat" before my head hits the pavement and I go under.

Should you dream when you hit your head? Perhaps I didn't fall so hard at all and I just used the fall as an excuse to succumb to the tiredness I perpetually feel just from being awake. I let myself lie there on the pavement, not wanting to get up, eyes closed. I imagined leaving my body, but not going towards

any light. I imagined leaving my body and floating downwards through pure darkness, alone and shed of physical and emotional baggage, nothing dragging on me. I was thinking, thank fuck I can finally rest. And seventeen creatures, furry and winged and white and translucent surrounded me and lifted me up. And for once I felt safe, and for once I felt free. I think I kinda knew that in reality I was lying on the pavement just down the road from my house when I was meant to be going on a date with a girl I was inexplicably crazy about, but I didn't care. I'd never felt so good, so weightless as lying there imagining seventeen creatures, essentially winged hamsters, holding me up.

I awoke in hospital the next day with my parents staring at me, looking all concerned. They hugged me and kissed me and I felt sick. I closed my eyes again, said I wanted to go back to sleep, but they couldn't shut up. Then it was all this quickfire bullshit, people asking me stupid questions, like my name, where I lived, how I felt, what I remembered. Make it stop, was my only thought.

I wasn't out for very long, maybe about seven hours, but they had to do all these tests on me, and keep me in another night for observation. I said that really wouldn't be necessary. I then said, not exactly proving my case, "It's alright, I don't need to, I wasn't tired, I just fell asleep, I deliberately didn't wake up."

"So, who's Eva?" my mum asked, smiling.

"Fuck off," came my reply, though I swear it was involuntary.

I turned over and buried my head in the pillow. My mum started crying. Hello guilt, I guess the brief reprieve is over.

"We've been so worried about you," said my dad, managing to turn that sentence into a reprimand for what I said to my mum.

They have my mobile phone, was all I could think. They've got my mobile phone, and they've been privy to my whole telecommunic history.

"I'm sorry. I'm just tired. I just wanna sleep."

In unison they gave me this look they give me sometimes when I disappoint them, this indescribable look of pity and fear like they're watching an

Aristotelian tragedy. It kills me, that look. I know it's only a reflection of the way I'm looking at them, killing them myself in my own way. "Sorry," I repeat. My dad goes to touch me again and I almost can't stand it. I tense up, but resist pushing him away. They stare at me for a painfully long time. I know they're wondering what went wrong. I close my eyes and try to go back to wherever I was after my head hit the pavement, but I dream instead that my hair keeps falling out and that nothing I do will cover the bald spot.

It's a couple of days before I'm given the all-clear, by which time I am unaccustomed to doing anything at all save lying down and reading. I wasn't in touch with anyone, unless you count the hospital staff and my parents. I wish they'd used my phone for good and not evil and called my friends to tell them what had happened.

By the time I got out of hospital Eva and Chris had gone to France, their next stop. It wasn't until five days after the event that I got my head together to text Eva. I emailed her, too. She replied to neither, which surprised me, because I thought she'd be the type to care. I mean, I'm not delusional, I never expected us to have the romance of the century. I just thought she'd respond out of courtesy or something. I'm sure she had her reasons. I thought a friendship between myself and Eva might somehow pull me out of this rut.

Yesterday I said it. I said, "Mum, I'm leaving." She replied fearfully, "But where are you going to go?" I hadn't got that far yet. But I'm genuinely getting out of here before the year's up. I'm gonna make plans, I'm gonna leave. I know I say that every year, but this time it's really true. Maybe I'll finally move to Leeds permanently. I love Leeds, but I've been visiting that city long enough to have plenty of bad memories. I guess everywhere I've been has memories. I need somewhere I don't remember, somewhere new. Brighton's too close to London. I heard San Francisco was fun, but would I last five minutes? Alone and in another country, is that not suicide for the likes of me? Eva's from Montreal. If I had the guts, I'd look her up again. ■

The Judges' Comments

Ali Smith: The voice of this is mesmerising. I very much like it. I'm not totally convinced that this is a short story - I think it's bigger, novelistic. This story's only just begun. I find the voice compelling, very funny, and admire the digressive quality that's both its form and its content. And its articulacy is really a fine thing. Its self-deprecation, its capturing of the absurdity of life, of trappedness, of analysis of gender position and hope and hopelessness, are all brilliant. Its theme of how we understand and judge worth, and its paralleling of real and political, I much enjoyed. But its voice I loved. Its very very strong and pervasive.

Michael Arditti: A skilful study of a woman who has been in a state of suspended animation since leaving university five years before. She lives with her parents and latches on to activists rather than doing anything herself, and her frustration and self-disgust exude from every line. She coolly delineates her ambiguous feelings about the eponymous Eva, a Canadian artist visiting England, while offering a fascinating guide to contemporary queer activism and Northern counter-culture.



* Lyrics by Irving Berlin from 'Annie Get Your Gun' 1946

Joey, The Brown Boy, and Ricky from *Narrative of the Life of the Brown Boy and the White Man* Ronaldo Wilson

In Kenya, there is a white man with cotton white hair standing against a backdrop of shields that look like hardened zebra hides matted onto wood. What excites the brown boy is the blue button down shirt which cloaks the traveller who has found himself in front of a row of shields, posing for a picture.

Joey, the white man's travel partner, has given him a pair of wrap around black shades that give the poseur what the brown boy interprets as drive. This force cuts from the photo out to the brown boy who says:

Now, this photo is hot. I'd fuck you in this one.

It is because the picture is cold and the man is lipless, red, white, balding save the spray of stark hair which haloes his head. It is because the African sun makes him look like a specimen among stone, a yachtsman, a man on vacation, a husband, a man with no time for fun, a dumb man, a harmless passenger, a fucker, a blow job's mindless recipient.

As the brown boy sits in this new world, cross-legged on a bed with the photograph and the white man at his disposal, he listens to him play the piano. Against this music, he realizes that his own work is entirely mobile, his thoughts racing at the prospect of finding any white man who will not only listen but who will also pay attention, and be willing to feed him whatever he wants. Get him to show him his neighbor's penthouse. Get him to show him their two thousand dollar puppy that will chew at their feet and remind the brown boy of an insect, rodent, or pest.

A Story:

The traveller is in charge of his neighbor's Yorkshire for a weekend. This dog, named Bon Bon, the white man believes, is a test. The dog's owners, a very rich and eccentric married couple, have invited him to dinner five times, only to cancel each date. Watching the dog, he knows, will get him, finally, into their apartment. It does. In fact, for the favor, her owners even loaned the traveller a car which they gave a number.

No. 90 is a brand new Durango that the Yorkshire's owners would like him to use not only to transport their dog, but to pick them up at Newark

when they return from skiing. The white man refuses. He can't drive that far. Besides, it's what he calls "the catch," the real price he has to pay to use No. 90 for the weekend.

Once, before a trip, one of the pet's owners, who the white man calls "the beautiful wife" was rushing - grabbing her dog, then her daughter, and one duffle bag after another - only to leave behind sixty-thousand dollars of jewels in a leather Louis Vuitton bag. She didn't want to take them in the first place, but the husband wanted her to show off the "antique jewelry" at a dinner in Vale. When they realized the jewels were missing, they phoned the hotel from the limousine. The staff ran out, no bag.

A week later, the police called the couple and said they had their bag, huddled in their local precinct's safe. Even though someone returned it, jewels intact, the two thousand dollar reward the pair posted went unclaimed.

In the white man's apartment, when the beautiful wife confessed - "I would give the reward to whoever returned my bag, if only I knew who it was," - the white man sang back, "_____, why, it was I." She returned: "Silly, it can't be you, _____, I know she was a woman," And they both laughed at his stupid joke.

The brown boy remembers the story, mostly because of this joke tied to the mark of desperation in his trying to win over the beautiful wife. But he is more impressed that the white man, who has finally made it into their home to watch Bon Bon while they are away, cannot wait to show off the opulence of the couple's possessions.

In their apartment, the brown boy is stunned by the paintings, not by the paintings themselves, but the paint in the paintings, especially the bile green drops of it floating out into the room. In fact, the whole room seemed a green blur, a smudge in his brain, the oil smothering him as though he were trapped in a small, lit closet crowded in by masterpiece after masterpiece, while Bon Bon, shut behind a door, scratched at it, longing to roll on the Persian rugs.

In the photograph, the white man in Africa is adorned with a wood carved medallion that sprouts teeth and is wired with feathers. It's confusing. What animal gave form to that wood, what lion those teeth, what bird, stripped of those feathers? Over his shoulders, in the blue horizon that sits in the chest of Listerine air spilling from the white man's mouth, the brown boy realizes he cannot always be in control of what he decides to look at. So when the white man shows him pictures of Ricky, a young Pinoy he met while travelling the Phillipines, the brown boy says, *I'm sorry, I have to confiscate these photos*, removing four from the stack and laying them in a row.

In the photo on the left, Ricky is acting active, tussling his hair with hands forced into his head by his own hard and slightly scarred arms. He is pushing into his hair with no trace of wanting anything but to be taken. Ricky's forehead is old, miscolored, poor and overly-shadowed. But even with this, the brown boy has only moments to make sense of Ricky. How long will the pet-sitter play the piano and sing while the brown boy takes over his photographs? How long will it take the brown boy to figure out that he is not exactly like Ricky? Though close in his want and submission, the brown boy exceeds Ricky in his power and control. How long will he have to laugh, out loud, at Ricky's small upturned penis?

In another photo which the brown boy has placed a few inches to the right of the first, Ricky's hands are gigantic, his arms - guns. Ricky seems to be emphasizing something, pushing into the picture his own joy, making the take, *all physical*.

Ignoring the growlings of the two thousand dollar animal that the white man has taken into his own home, the brown boy suspends himself in Ricky's hands, feels the push of them out into space towards him. Is this emphatic push what Ricky's hard little brown cock suggests in the photo less than an inch to the left? Who would ever want that? Who?

What the brown boy wanted was to capture all four photos, reading them like he used to read pictures of algae, bone, plants, and animals in the *International Wildlife Encyclopedias* that lined his mother's sewing room. Remembering a span of yellow fish fanned out in water, escaping the camera, the brown boy thinks: *I've never been to the Philippines or Africa*.

In a rush, he constructs this thought into the third photo he placed to the right of the second. Here, Ricky is cropped: his crossed arms and winning smile flatter the sense of contentment that wipes across his entire face, a mood he most likely borrowed from the face of a drop dead gorgeous model.

The brown boy wonders if these photos were gifts Ricky gave to the white man in the hope that he would bring him all the way from the Phillipines to New York to his tiny apartment in the *Estonia*. Did

the white man announce his modest digs to Ricky as he announced them to the brown boy? Did he call his home a *closet in the Estonia* as Ricky lifted his body on the bed into a perfect planch? *I'll hold however long it takes me to get to America*, Ricky may have thought, while the fourth photo was snapped, his legs perfectly extended.

The brown boy thinks this because the photos are pathetic, and Ricky is going nowhere; they are really extensions of the brown boy's own loss. Like Ricky, he is stuck, dumb and flexing, an isolate, which the white man will travel right through.

It is because of this thought that the brown boy stops looking at Ricky, planching, and gives the white man a writing assignment: *Write a poem in which you speak as yourself in a photo of you in Africa*. The brown boy finds another picture. In it, the white man is almost invisible in the shot of dusk giving way to night in Morocco. He asks him to use this one, because there is nothing in the background but one black surface, where he barely turns out, a red shadow.

Joey Has a Fat Face

He tells the white man this, because Joey, his travel partner, is a medical student from Hawaii and at the top of his class. But even though the brown boy wants to hate Joey, he cannot. After all, he saw Joey's face and the photographs of Ricky, two brown boys in one, almost at once. And after all, Joey did take the portraits of his traveller in Africa! Besides, the brown boy, who is beautiful, is not threatened by Joey. Because when he asked the white man whether or not he thought Joey was beautiful, too, he answered: *Joey is beautiful in his own way*.

The brown boy knows this means nothing. He stares at the veins along his own wrists, the map of them green and strong, the red brimming just below his skin, the black hiding, the pink burning, the shadows coursing, deft, around his forearm. What he wants is a mirror so he can look at his jawbone flying out from his face in two pointed, yet balanced, directions, his own body cutting out and away from his self, which tells him he is perfect and relentlessly free from ever being called anything like *beautiful in his own way*. ■

"Joey, the Brown Boy, and Ricky" appeared under the title "Notes of the Life of the Brown Boy and the White Man" in *Corpus*. Ed. Robert Reid-Pharr, Vol. 3.1 (Fall 2005).

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Sinisa Savic
from the series
*Why Are the
Beautiful Ones
Always Insane*

Project:QueerLit

The Finalists

Project:QueerLit (projectqueerlit.com) celebrates and brings media attention to unpublished authors of queer writing, and opens doors for publication of their work. The contest is open to any unpublished author of an English-language novel with queer and/or bent content.

Members of the committee read and review the first twenty pages of each applicant's novel to determine the twenty-five semi-finalists and six finalists. Each committee member then reads and reviews the six finalists' full manuscript to choose the winning entry. On December 15, the top-rated contestants will be announced. The contest is judged anonymously, and is administered by Greg Wharton, Ian Philips and Sean Meriwether. *Chroma* is proud to be one of the sponsors of Project:QueerLit.

Below are the opening paragraphs from the novels of the six finalists.

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The Fluidity of Angels

The first thing I noticed about him was that his left eye was bruised black and blue. The second thing I noticed was that he was proud of it, as if it were something he had worked very hard for. He was taller than most men I was attracted to, over six feet, and he was young, nineteen or twenty. What attracted me to him most were his hands, the way they moved, like birds trying to separate themselves from the rest of his body. I noticed, sometimes, when he was talking, that he would try to hold them down, placing one above the other, not wanting them to give away whatever was going on inside of him, beyond what he was saying. But they did give it away. In the end they gave it all away. I wonder if he ever really knew that he had no control over them, that in the end they would break free. I think someone else, someone who wasn't me, would say that Zack was cruel, that those hands that I found so beautiful were weapons for his anger. It's true that in those moments when he could no longer control them they would sometimes break free, only to strike out at whoever got in their way. I only knew Zack for a few days. On the last day I was with him I watched his hands reach up and out of his grasp, pounding their way into the face of a drunken

teenager, holding him down and pounding into him, as if the only way for them to be free—for him to be free—was through the incessant smashing of the boy's face.

* * *

Initiate's Rise

As he emerged from his hovel, Old Squat knew that the day would match the many that had preceded it. It would be dry. Bone dry. He could smell it in the air and feel it in his mouth. It was as if dirt rested upon his tongue.

Too dry to spit, he thought.

The day would be hot as well, if the sun's warmth on his bronzed, weathered skin was any indication. Already the sun was unhindered enough to warm him at first touch and bright enough to force him to squint.

Old Squat grunted, dissatisfied. And dissatisfaction made him anxious.

Impulsively, he touched the small leather relic bag that hung from his waist, patting it four times.

Touching a little magic always calmed him.

He hobbled the hundred yards it took to get from

hovel to community well, relying on his walking stick to aid his steps. As he reached the well, a hoard of boys arrived to fetch their families' water for the day. They converged there, all commotion and noise as they jostled each other in pecking-order chatter and bravado. They ignored Old Squat's presence even though he focused his attention on them, watching them as they worked the well's pump to see how long it took the water to rise up and come to them.

* * *

Loop

Catfish burrow into red mud. They'll eat anything that fits in their mouths. The Red River laces Oklahoma to Texas, giving Oklahoma's cleaver its jagged edge. The Red River feeds Louisiana's Black Swamp. Highway 82 stabilizes the river's mud and connects Arkansas to Texas. Four states come together in a hound's tooth. Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma. Shakes, Arkansas is where the road crosses the river.

The highway stretches through impenetrable woods. Thin poplars and tall pines force one another toward the sky. New growth from morning rains tint the May air green. There are small paths, deer trails, invisible from the road. People living along this stretch of 82 are glad they cannot see what's in these woods. The county struggles to keep the woods at bay. Roots snake beneath the road. Afternoon humidity thickens the air. Nothing will dry out until August.

* * *

Men with their Hands

There's a picture of me from the Christmas of 1975. It shows me sitting in the kitchen, on the bench between the table and the large window, and I am putting some Lego bricks together. If you look at it closely, you'll see my old hearing aids. I wore them on my chest, almost like a bra. My hair looks a bit ragged but it's still a very dirty blond. In fact my hair appears more yellow than the kitchen walls. I am wearing an acrylic blue-and-white turtleneck sweater; all my hearing brothers and sisters were too busy playing with my oldest sister Gracey's new hamster Homer. I was nine years old at the time.

Gracey popped that one without warning. She had been using her new Kodak camera all day since she got it for Christmas. After that happened, I rubbed my eyes to get the ping of the flash imprinted on the insides of my eyelids. Then I went on with my Lego building.

* * *

Mono No Aware (The Sorrow of Things)

I was born in Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan, in 2024. The teens and twenties were turbulent times for the nation of Japan. The government bolstered itself against dropping birthrates by offering financial incentives to couples for each child they produced. But the problem was more complicated than anyone could have realized. Lack of adequate sex education and insufficient condom use meant that a particularly insidious strain of venereal disease had caused damage to the reproductive systems of countless women. The Japanese, who had always neglected to take precautions against the HIV virus they believed themselves to be safe from, were now faced with the consequences of mass infertility. The nation was a stagnating cesspool of the idle middleclass, aging "freeter" slackers who had never bothered to get skilled jobs, and the burgeoning elderly fighting over rapidly dwindling pension funds. The government responded by increasing short-term work visas for factory and farm workers from overseas, resulting in an influx of workers from Eastern Europe, South America and Asia, who were required to pay into social security and taxes without receiving social benefits.

* * *

My Hero: A Wild Boy's Tale

This boy has time. Got an old god behind him; a throw-back, primordial beast of the deepest waters, the furthest reaches of space. Came to him in a dream one day and said: "Boy? Boy? You have to go. You've got to fly away." Whispered all heavy, middle-of-sleep sweat hanging off the balls, hard all juicy-tipped from the emanations of this creature. This old beast.

You gotta ride. You gotta fly. On the road, thinking that old priest ain't nothing on a god, and if I gotta fuck something, it's gotta be holy. Nothing left at home. Fuck Mary. Fuck the holy ghost. Jesus is alright, all that blood and all nice and slippy got the lube all fixed up there. Just rear into that holy mound of thin, sinuous tortured muscle. Like I do when he comes to me. Cock hard as the nails in him; he gotta love being crucified face so peaceful and all, like he just came a big wet slippery one and laid down to rest. Hell, I'd fuck the wound in his wrist. Next time he cums in me I'll see if he minds.

—Now just push forward and swallow.

Nicki Hastie

When I Photographed My Breasts

When I photographed my breasts
I waited until you were asleep.
In broad daylight I was pretty sure,
in priority order, number one:
the neighbours couldn't see; and
two: I would show you afterwards.

There are times to be self-conscious.

You like how I undress.
Perhaps you like it more
the less you do.
No matter what I say,
it's your truth I hear most now:
how your body let you down.

Some days, you feel you let this body down.

We find our own support. In shirts,
you shelter the fullest breast as you walk.
I wear tight-fitting vests to flatten,
still hoping to flatter, my symmetry.
You carry one-and-a-half water-wings,
one a heavy swell, half surgically-contained.

Occasionally, we joke about these things.

When I photographed my breasts
I thought we only had pictures of you
bruised, patched, still bloodied and scarred,
from when you couldn't look, let alone feel.
I wished you had asked me to take them,
raising arms together in early autumn light.

Now I remember
that other photograph
on Sappho's beach.
Breasts, arms and legs quite open,
the camera's self-timer counting down
to our total exposure.

Chris Beckett

The Haggis Story

*Strange fits of passion I have known,
And I will dare to tell... William Wordsworth*

There's too much narrative in poetry today,
a lady from Canada said.

So I told her a story:
how we found the perfect haggis
in a Chinese fish and chip shop in Tarbert,
one sparse salty afternoon
waiting for the ferry to Cowal and the Kyles of Bute,

how I was so shocked by the lovely taste of it,
from the sweetness of its heart and lights,
their delicate mincing with onions, suet and oatmeal,
simmered lambswool-soft in the belly of a sheep,
to the little sting of chilli in its tail –

that I was inspired to fall on my knees
right there on the windy quayside at Tarbert,
with my mouth full of rich haggisian musk,
a toy ferry nosing towards us across the strait –

and propose marriage to the man I love,
the man I've simmered with, well, it must be over twenty years,
who looked up from ferreting the glove-box for Bowie,
(or was it Bach?) and smiled so patiently, as if to say:
Yes, of course, Chris, but where's the Martha Argerich CD?

So I asked the lady from Canada,
how would she write the poem of the shockingly lovely haggis
and the salty afternoon –
without the little ferry to the Kyles of Bute?
without the man I love who said he'd marry me?

The Judge's Comments

Mark Doty: "The Haggis Story" slyly presents itself as a comment on contemporary poetry, questioning narrative practice, while at the same time delivering a charming love story that's inflected so casually and convincingly as to resist sentimentality. It's a model of an unexpectedly moving love poem.

Two Tickets for the Musical

P O'Loughlin

There was no money but she had the telly. Watching the old films of a Sunday afternoon was the only time when she wouldn't move for love nor money. Not that she had either of those. She smiled here.

It was Tuesday. Ironing day. Monday was wash day. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday morning she worked at the health centre, cleaning. Thursday she hoovered and cleaned and dusted at home. Still there didn't seem to be enough hours in the day. She'd been saying that only the other day down the health centre. Mrs Carey, the receptionist, laughed and agreed, but there was something in the laugh that wasn't funny. "You're the cleaner and I'm the receptionist," said the laugh. Like all Mrs Carey's laughs. Sometimes, somedays, everything everybody said had something else hid inside it. You don't need to be a brainbox to know a snob when you meet one, but sometimes she just despaired.

At least David was brainy. Brainier than her. Brainier than his father (though that wasn't hard). He even had to get glasses and he was only eleven and a half. She had to laugh. The thought of him in a big pair of brainy glasses made her laugh.

His father would be home soon for his dinner. The stew was on. She just had to finish the ironing and go down to Donnelly's for bread and cigarettes. She was on the sheets now. She liked ironing sheets, the smell of them clean and no awkward seams to worry about, the iron just glided through them, clean and warm and smooth. Of course, you could burn sheets if you weren't careful. She should know, she'd done it often enough. But you have to be in a bad way to burn things and she felt fine today, though God knows how long that would last.

She hummed along with the radio as she worked.

When she'd finished and put away everything, she turned off the radio and got her coat. (He always left the radio on so robbers would think there was somebody in, but she couldn't be bothered.) Of course, the dog appeared as soon as it heard her putting her coat on, but she shooed it away. She hated the bloody thing. David's father had got it for him

two Christmases ago and the pair of them doted over it like a baby. It was a filthy nuisance, as far as she was concerned, with dirt always clogged around its backside. She had no love for animals, not since she was a girl. And that was certainly a long time ago, felt like a whole bloody century. The things she did when she was a young one would kill any mother. David was really a very good child when she thought of what she was like at his age.

It was a grey day, drizzling the kind of rain that got into your bones. She walked quickly, holding the collar of her coat closed. Mrs Finnegan passed her on the other side of the road but she pretended not to see. Just didn't want to talk to people these days. Talking to people made her feel like there was some part of her missing. Everybody else seemed to have this part. But what did that mean? Were there other people who felt the same? She didn't think so. The question she wanted to ask everybody was: Are you the same as me or not?

The shop was empty, thank God. She didn't like Mrs Donnelly and Mrs Donnelly didn't like her. They talked about the weather while Mrs Donnelly got the bread and cigarettes. When the change was handed over she checked it to make sure there was no mistake; it wouldn't be the first time she was left short in here.

Then Mrs Donnelly says, "Oh, there's something I've been meaning to tell you," she says. "It's about your David..."

"What is it?" she asked, looking up from her purse. "I hope he hasn't been bold."

She tried to sound as normal as possible, but it was hard. A horrible panic was building inside of her... Dear God! What could David have done?

"Oh, he hasn't been bold," says Mrs Donnelly in a weird, sing-song kind of way. "Not really." And she did an incredible thing here. She began to arrange all the cream cakes lined up on the metal sheet under the glass, and each cream cake she touched energised her in some way so that she got bigger and stronger and owned more shops and even supermarkets, the new thing, and her hair got nicer and nicer like it cost a fortune and how could you win against this power

that was growing every second like it would never stop until the whole world got sucked into the dangerous whirlpools of Mrs Donnelly's eyes.

The only way to stop something so powerful was to meet it head on, and be ready to fight with every bit of yourself.

"Exactly what are you talking about, Mrs Donnelly?" This was her special voice, clear and strong and frightening.

And Mrs Donnelly must have been taken by surprise, because it worked, really worked; she shrunk down there and then the shop was normal again, like it usually was.

"Well," she says, her voice weak and a little shaky. "Your David's been buying cigarettes and they're not the ones you smoke... because I know what you smoke.... and I know your husband doesn't smoke... and, well, I thought..."

"And you've just been handing out cigarettes to my son, knowing they weren't for me, knowing they were for himself to smoke and him only eleven and a half." She was flying now. Her lifeless hair expanded into a full-blown demi-wave, its lustrous, high-lighted splendour filling the shop-space, shameless and confident. "Really, Mrs Donnelly," she said. "I'd expect a woman like you to have more sense."

"Well, I thought...", Mrs Donnelly swallowed, brushing both hands on the sides of her white smock, her eyes agape at the crazy, undulating hair-do. "Well... I thought... I thought you might have had visitors staying... who smoked *Consulate*." She struggled onward. "I know you smoke *Embassy*, but you could have had somebody staying who smoked *Consulate*."

The hair-do deflated. This was reasonable. Sometimes an old bachelor uncle from the country came up for the big football games; he was a smoker. She began to relax, but she was still in control.

"Well, we've not had visitors in a long time, and I'm saying this only once: never sell my son any cigarettes except *Embassy*. Thank you, Mrs Donnelly."

With that, she left the shop, slamming the door behind her.

She had time for a cup of tea and a biscuit before he arrived home for his dinner. The house was silent. She lit a cigarette and watched the smoke curl in the dim light of the living room. Quiet like this was rare and lovely. Her eyes wandered over the furniture, the wallpaper, the curtains, the lino. She'd been trying to get him to put up new wallpaper for months now. You only had to look behind that photograph of the three of them to see how faded and shabby everything was. Everything always got dirty and old. Clothes, shoes, furniture... there was always something needed buying.

She went into the kitchen to stir the stew. He'd be home in a few minutes. She hated the smell of petrol

and gas that always filled the house when he got home from the garage, but he wouldn't let her open the window in this weather. He was always cold. Sometimes she wondered if he had any blood in him at all.

There was the sound of the key turning in the door and he came in. She knew immediately that he was in a sulk over something, so she just put the food down in front of him, saying nothing.

"Put on the radio there, will you," he said.

She switched the radio on. That new song was on. Judy Garland's daughter singing it. It was on the radio all the time now.

"That's Judy Garland's daughter singing," she said.

"I didn't know she had a daughter," he said, chewing.

"Well, this is her singing," she replied.

They lapsed into silence. When the song was over the man on the radio said it was from a new musical. She loved musicals.

The rain stopped in the afternoon, but she decided she was going to go anyway. She could use the gas money she was saving in the kitchen drawer. God knows *he'd* squandered enough money in his time. She set up the fire to be lit as soon as they got back so it would have taken by the time he got home from work. The film was on at half four so they'd be home by seven. He wouldn't get back till eight because he was doing the overtime and there was plenty of stew left so she wouldn't have to worry about cooking something.

David was off at four. She could meet him outside the school and be in town in time for the trailers. She couldn't miss any part of the pictures, even the ads. And she wasn't going to lose her temper over the cigarettes. She'd talk to him like an adult. Like the little man he was turning into right in front of her eyes. She was hardly a good example, anyway, puffing away morning, noon and night, but you needed something this day and age just to keep you sane, if nothing else.

The bell went off just as she got to the school, so she was spot on time. In a minute the first boys would be out. David was usually with the last. He'd be talking and chatting to his friends, probably embarrassed to see her there. Maybe even annoyed. You could never tell what he was feeling or how he'd be acting these days. She was separate from him now, and especially here at the school where his life had nothing to do with the house or the family. Whatever the family was. Sometimes when the three of them sat down to watch something really good on telly it felt like a family.

A solitary boy was the first to amble through the gates. His gaze seemed to be fixed directly on her and for a minute she wondered if she knew him. He walked slowly across the road looking at her straight in the face. Then he put his schoolbag down on the ground a few feet away from her, took a cigarette out of the

breast pocket of his blazer and lit up, inhaling deeply, watching her through large, watery eyes. She felt like she was being hypnotised. She couldn't take her eyes off him, and all the noise on the street went as if somebody had turned the sound down. She often wondered if the world was just a big telly.

"What are you looking at?" he asked. His voice was high like a girl's, and smoke came out of his nose as he talked.

"You're too young to be smoking. Does your mother know you smoke?" She was relieved that her voice sounded normal.

"What's it to you anyway, Missus?" His long fingers brought the cigarette up to his mouth again. He inhaled. There was something delicate in the way he moved.

"I like smoking," he said. "Anyway, I'm doing nobody any harm."

"You'll be sorry when you grow up."

"No, I won't."

"Don't be cheeky, you little bugger."

"Oh, fuck off."

With that, he picked up his bag and ran off. He stopped further up the road and shouted something back at her, but it was lost in the general din from the school gates as more and more boys flooded onto the street. She kept watching him until he disappeared. When he was definitely gone, she took out a cigarette and lit it.

And then she picked out David's face at the school gate. He hadn't seen her yet, so she just watched him without moving. She felt nervous because he was with all his friends. They probably all smoked, but at least he wasn't girlish like that other boy. David was a real boy, always had been.

It struck her then that maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe he wouldn't want to go to the pictures. He liked musicals on television, but it was years since she'd brought him to the pictures. Well, there was no two ways about it; he'd just have to come, like it or lump it.

He was standing talking to another boy now, both of them swinging their schoolbags. They looked very serious. She had to laugh at how fat he was compared to the others. But it wasn't funny: a boy his age shouldn't be carrying around so much weight. Still, it was probably only puppy fat.

Next of all he was in a fight, using his schoolbag as a shield, aiming kicks at another boy. She wasn't sure if it was pretend or real. They disappeared into the throng. After a minute, just as she was wondering whether to go over and get him in case she missed him altogether, he appeared at the edge of the crowd, waving to her. She waved back and beckoned him over, but he disappeared again.

And then suddenly, as if by magic, he was beside her.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. He was in a cheeky, good mood. She looked at him, not sure what to say.

"Are you alright, Mam?" He was looking at her, worried, like she was the child and he was the grown-up.

"Yes... yes, I'm fine." She looked away from him over to the school gates and all the other boys still hanging around, laughing and shouting. Her heart jumped as she noticed the girlish boy was back, watching her.

"What are you looking at, Mam?"

"Nothing."

She turned back to her son. How fat he'd become. Here, surrounded by so many skinny lads, he seemed the fattest of all.

She made herself smile: "Do you want to come to the pictures? There's a new musical on."

"Really, are we going to the pictures?"

"Amn't I after telling you we are?"

He said nothing. She felt him slipping away from her.

"Well, do you want to come or not? Make up your mind, or we'll be late"

"Yes, I want to come," he said.

She smiled again, relieved for both of them: "Well, let's go!" she said.

It was only a fifteen minute walk into town. She tackled him about the cigarettes on the way: "I don't ever want Mrs Donnelly coming to me with stories about you. She's a busybody and I don't like her, and if she ever complains about you again, there'll be trouble."

He was quiet, but she knew he was listening.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, Mam."

They walked on for a while in silence, then he said: "But you smoke."

"I know I smoke, smart Alec, but that doesn't mean you can. I suppose if I put my head in the fire, you'd do the same."

No answer.

"Well?"

"No, I wouldn't." He sounded very serious.

"Well, remember then, the next time you want to smoke a cancer stick, it's a dirty habit, and you'll never have any money in your pocket either, and God knows you need money this day and age. Life isn't easy, you know."

"Why don't you stop smoking?" he asked.

"I'm not talking about me. I'm talking about you."

"But *why* don't you stop?"

"Now, that's enough, David. I don't want to say any more about it."

They were nearly there.

"Mam?"

"Yes, son?"

"Did you get your hair done?"

She turned to him, surprised and pleased: "Yes, I did. Do you like it?"

"It's lovely."

"Thank you, son. You see, you can be a good boy

when you want to be."

"Can I have some sweets for the film, then, please?"

"What would you like?"

"Popcorn and ice-cream."

"And how about some Maltesers and lemonade?"

"Yes, please."

They bought the sweets in a sweet shop because sweets are always so dear when you buy them in the pictures. The ice-cream would have to wait until the intermission, otherwise it would melt.

There was a wall-to-wall carpet in the cinema. Everything smelled lovely and clean. She felt suddenly happy as she walked to the counter.

"Two tickets for the musical, please".

The girl behind the counter looked at her funny. Then she stood up off her stool and looked over the counter at David. She turned to the other girl and said something, but you couldn't hear what they were saying because of the glass. Then the girl leaned over to the place in the glass where you speak. She had a lot of make-up on.

"I'm afraid that film is over 18s," she said.

"Sorry, no, we want to go to the musical."

"Yes, I know, but it's over 18s. You can't bring children in."

"This is the film with Judy Garland's daughter in it?"

"Yes, and it's over 18s." The girl sounded annoyed now. "Look, I have to serve the man behind you."

She stepped back to let the man buy his ticket.

"I can't believe they're making dirty *musicals* now," she said. "We can't go in, David, it's over 18s."

"Why can't we go in?" he asked.

"Because they won't let us in."

"Can I eat my sweets, then?"

"Can't you ever think of anything else besides your bloody stomach?" she hissed. People turned to look as she grabbed him by the hand and marched him out onto the street.

On the bus home she thought of all the films she'd seen when she was a young girl and there was no such thing as over 18s. Going to the pictures was a special occasion for dressing up and going out with your friends for the night, and no worries about get-

ting home to cook the dinner and light the bloody fire. Of course, all those friends were married now and moved away. Married to other lazy buggers, no doubt. And what could be going on in a musical to make it over 18s, anyway?

The mind boggled.

She looked out the window at the grey street passing, the green river beyond. It was drizzling again and she'd left the clothes out on the line. It was that time of year when everything always went wrong. Seems like every day, every year, always, everything, and everybody on this bloody bus and outside too, including her son. This feeling was in her stomach. It was always there, waiting for her to drop her guard.

She'd had a friend who never got married and now she was an alcoholic living in a bedsit somewhere. That's all people ever said about her: Eileen's taken to the drink. But that did mean something. Letting yourself go is a terrible and miserable thing.

She closed her eyes and saw Eileen's face, the young, bright girl, soft-skinned. What could she look like after twenty years of the drink? It's a terrible thing for a woman to drink... she'd heard that plenty of times... a terrible thing for a woman to drink... a terrible drink for a woman to drink... a terrible thing for a woman to think. God, maybe it was a song. She imagined Eileen going to confession: Bless me, father, for I am drunk. Should a woman go to confession if she's taken to the bottle?

Poor Eileen. She missed her... going to the pictures with her.

Something touched her and she jumped. It was David: "Mammy... this is our stop." He looked scared.

She turned away from him, didn't want to see his face now. Couldn't bear the need in it. All that need and worry.

She got up and followed him to the front of the bus. She lit a cigarette as soon as she'd stepped off. The match went out twice in the wind. David stood there watching. Her hands shook. All this anger inside her. She inhaled deep into her body as if somehow this would kill the part of her that was mad, that would, as soon as they were in the door, beat her son until he cried like a girl. ■

The Judges' Comments:

Michael Arditti: The winning story is at once a sharp and evocative character study of an undereducated, marginalized woman, a tender exploration of the deep yet dysfunctional relationship between a mother and son, and a subtle evocation of a bygone time and place. The central image of an adult musical (Cabaret) to which the mother is forbidden to take her eleven year old son brilliantly encapsulates the growing gulf between them as he grows up to a world of sexual and social possibility and she is left behind. The final moments when she takes violent and unexpected revenge send shivers down the spine.

Ali Smith: What a wonderful story. Its notion of time and place is acute. Its idiomatic simplicity is perfectly held. Its ending is just brilliant. Kept so clear and seemingly simple, it works very well on unforced multi-layers. Most of all, its skill with what goes unsaid is subtle and admirable and what makes it unforgettable. What a beauty.

John Dixon Back at Mine

He stayed longer than I thought.
I grew restive and facetious,
rude even, at his expense.
He didn't seem to mind.

He told me about himself –
which didn't greatly interest me.
And when he asked me questions
I didn't bother to pretend
I was other than I was.
He'd killed all the euphoria
of a chance meeting in the street.

At dawn the objects in the room
began to reassert themselves.
I kept thinking of the little chores
I'd put off
by going out last night.

I dreaded that he'd joke
and write
his name and number
in the dust
on some unpolished surface.

John Dixon Back at His

The walk across the Common –
back from his place –
restores my equilibrium.

A low mist
hangs above the grass
like a medicinal suspension.

Why did I go back?
It was farther than he said
and he was made less exciting
by speech, domestic lights, politeness.

We should have stayed here
where I met him.
Risked close contact in the open.
Then still fresh, elated and in good time
I could have gone
straight home.

Dirty A:Gender

Joey Hateley

26

Snivelling pathetic red-faced screaming little runt. You never stop, never shut up, full of lies and loathing and self-pity, drivelling on about how hard you've had it, sucking on a silver spoon. We've all had it hard. Gotta accept it. Bite down till the numbness kicks in, shrivel down to size, pick yourself up and get on with it. Do you see me playing the violin? I ain't got time for that bollocks. I'm a fighter. Always have been, always will be. You don't know the meaning of the word.

As soon as they see me, even before they begin to talk to me, people need to know. It's that moment of crisis. They're not sure how to place me, don't quite know how to interact, what level to relate on, how to be themselves. When I don't defend what's in my trousers, that's even weirder! It's not as simple as that, anyway. I'm not... people aren't as simple as that. And there's loads of us that feel that way. Loads of us stuck in the middle of this man/woman shit. Like that particular muscle or that type of flesh makes this body whole. So if you've got a clit the only silicone you're allowed is the kind in your lips, or from your arse to your tits. The only cellulite you take is from your thighs and your hips, not from your tits and definitely not to be added to your bits! No silicone dicks for pricks.

There was a vague underlying threat that festered beneath the surface that you couldn't reach. The knife grew blunt. Sharpen it. The brain grew blunt. Abandon it. I could kiss the end at the bottom of a needle. Hot sickly night melting the spine, sucking my tongue. Even when my eyes were shut tightly, the pulsating drone from the fireplace flashed restlessly, eating the air. The beginning was nearer, drumming sweeter, caressing softer, loving me more than anyone. She didn't want anything else. She didn't need a reflection. That house was a place where people were frightened of living. I told you that the pain you felt then would make it easier in the end. I opened my mouth, made the sound of pissing and gasping for air. You let the flames cover my body to soothe your-

self until there was nothing left to do but let go. You awoke in the middle of the night and found red, running in grime round the rim of the bath. In the morning, the sweat had evaporated, leaving my mind dry in the corner of my eye.

Are you a man because of your XY chromosome? Are you a woman because of your XX? How do you know you're not XXY or XXX? You could be XO, you could be XYY, and someone here's got to be YYY. There are over seven hundred recognised intersex conditions. Transsexuality may be just one of them. Are you a woman if you bleed every month? And if you don't? If you've got a vagina but no womb? If you don't have breasts? If your cunt's been artificially constructed? Or if you're born with both? If you were fixed at birth by a surgeon? Chances are 1 in 10,000 you were born hermaphrodite; hundreds and thousands across time; murdered at birth; children of Satan; stoned to death, slayed as a witch; or abandoned. And it's such a simple operation, even parents are rarely told. So if your dick was any shorter than one and a half centimetres then it would have been snip; definitely a girl. It's easier to make a hole than a pole. But it's not like you were given the right to choose. I mean, you can't really turn round when you pop out and say: "Don't fix me now! I'll wait until I've grown up to decide."

You made sure of that. Kicked every bit of fight out of her. Systematically broke her into so many pieces, she don't know what bits go where. You take her to hell... and she brings herself back every time... and in some sick kinda way she worships you for it. Because that's all she's ever known. And the more she loves you, the more you want her to stop... the more you want to break her, show her what a bastard you really are and when you finally do – once again: she loves you for it... and she made you do it. You don't hate her. You hate yourself. You hate seeing yourself in her. Hate seeing what you've done. What's been done to you.

Ignorance is bliss – and you’re so fucking cute with it. You try so hard to take care of you, but you haven’t got a clue. You do what you can with him lurching round corners, clawing at your heels. Every day. His constant prey. You do so well to keep it together and that sadistic bastard just keeps on cumming. Devastated your childhood – fucked every foundation. But that’s not enough. He just keeps on going. And still you do so well, a successful professional and respected family man with a beautiful wife and child. You must be so proud. How do you do it? Bravo brave soldier. So strong and sorted. Such a well-rounded spirit that just happily gets on with it. So intelligent! Remarkable! So terrifying you can function at the expense of all else. (You stupid fucking wanker.) The kid thinks you’re going to be her hero? Save yourself, little girl, because no one else is going to.

The frog told my spoon to be a good girl. It grinned and liquid ran, hard. I lay cold and still in your dry dirt trying to breathe. I crouched inside myself listening like an animal to our silence. I tried to scream, but choked on shame. I was angry with fear. Now I hold time’s dagger in my dirty red hands and wait... for this... to stop.

If worms merely rot flesh and suck senses then they have no power over me. My mortality melts as I decompose in no-man’s land. I have escaped all-knowing eyes and tongues set in the mortar of high-rise cages and flown north north-east over enlightened caves. I have shared Medusa’s marbles and fought mutation by freezing maggots beneath the desert on the outskirts of sanity. I have de-masked the mystery in dew-drenched valleys drowning towers by unlearning “truths” encircling moon-eclipsed silver-streaked lips. I exposed their lies and bewitched myself. I have tunnelled beneath the Phoenix’s nest and turned the hourglass inside out to reach the eternal end where we may begin. Deep in the forest of no regrets.

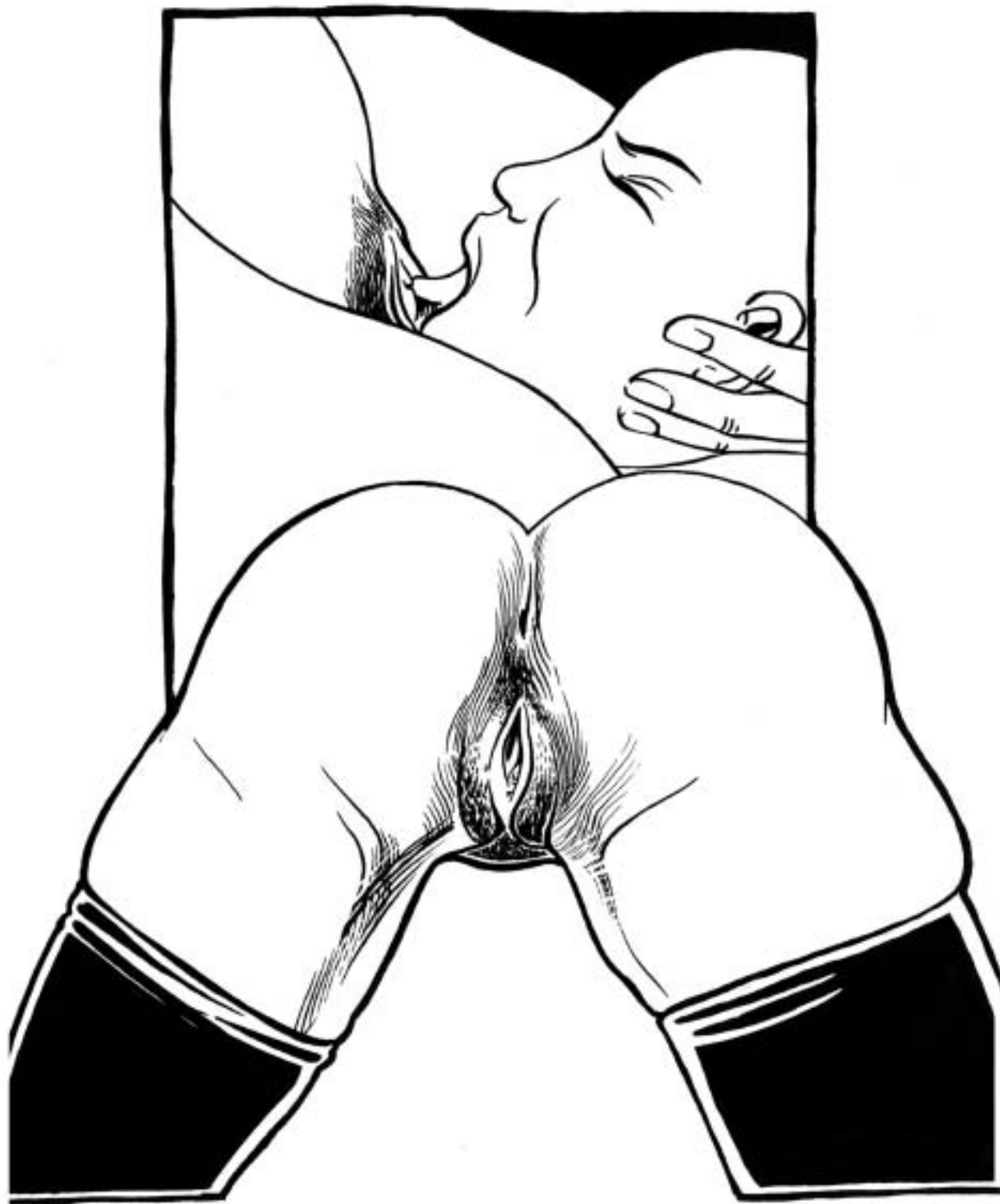
Thousands of mud miles surrounded by matchstick fifty-foot fence-posts I’d tried to climb before. The electric gets stronger as you go up. I ran towards the house on the horizon, sand-monsters clasping at my feet, breaking through the cracks. I’d never make it out that house alive. I found a child under every sand dune, pulled the mud out of their mouths and carried as many as I could on my back. A shape-shifter answered the door – hurried us in as water gushed from the cellar, gave each child an animal to keep in their pocket. I led them onwards and upwards, sharing any food I found, pulling out roots from their swollen bellies, outsmarting creature after creature. The shadow-demons alerted all beings in the house to our presence. The floorboards crumbled beneath our

feet as we reached the fifth floor. We crawled up the outside of the house as pterodactyls swooped down, each child throwing their animal into the air to save each other’s life. When we reached the door to the attic, the ceiling caved in. Lost in treasure caves, we climbed a tree trunk that turned into a ladder. We had to go down to come up. Trust, then jump into the mist. My body fell too fast, disintegrated.

The spider six-packed the words into a cocooned cave that breathed with sun drops, slithering eyes fermenting the silence that was its home. From the hillside, all was still. Born from the injustice of nature, the cruelty of meaning, before words were pictures and survival was the law of the land. The little girl dared to travel through fermenting forests, capturing un-chartered bird songs patterned with the infinite beauty of chromatics. Stratospheric energy churned wind into water, fertility into food, soil into seeds, healing the galaxy and her garden. Standing alone in the vastness of peace, transcendence was blessed by the forces that kept sacred the mysteries of time itself. The moon smiled in shards through savage storm clouds and the earth groaned with the need to be fed, taken, stripped, pillaged and re-seeded. The essence of grace fell like leaves to cover the lake’s secrets. And the little girl knew she would carry her hope through the seasons with the weight of the world in her womb. ■

Excerpts from the script *DIRTY* and the one-person show *A:Gender*.

28



May and August

Crusader Hillis

Earlier

They met at a university beer-drinking contest. Jim was on his way to the law faculty where he lectured in copyright law. He saw Lin. Her arm was linked with a tall, long-haired skinny boy, poised to skull the third in a line of pots of beer. She saw Jim. She held his gaze while she drained the pot and won the competition. She licked away the frothy moustache from above her bright lips and grinned, then reached around and hugged her blonde boyfriend.

Lin recognised Jim. She dragged her lanky boyfriend over and re-introduced herself.

Their families had known of one other in Shanghai for almost a century before they moved to Melbourne. When Lin was a child, Jim had watched her shepherd her younger playmates in his parents' rambling Coburg garden, but Jim didn't see the bossy nine-year-old in the confident face of this first-year university student.

Later on

With a retrenchment package from the Government printer, Lin bought a Mac and some software. She started a design business at home. Work was slow in the first months, but she had savings. An internet provider revealed the joys of email and surfing the internet took up quiet mornings. She clicked on an author link at Salon.com and was transported to a black screen loading with Egyptian ankhs and Greek zeta symbols. An Yvonne DeCarlo look-alike filled the screen. The only text on the page were the words "Chat with me." Lin clicked.

Later still

Lin's scooter stalled on the side of the road. Smoke poured out of the grill. Freeing her bag from the rack, she walked along the emergency lane, her right thumb towards the road, her eyes ahead. She didn't hear the truck as it veered across the road and forced her through its windscreen. Her bones broke and her blood pooled heavy above the wipers. The driver's heart had stopped beating a moment before Lin's.

Before that

Lin had picked the nickname May/August because they were their birthday months. There were seven users in the Couples chat room. As Jim hit the return key, their name was added to the list. Jim usually clammed up after his first sentence, his fingers turning to clods. Lin took over.

After this

Jim composed a list of things he missed about Lin's body: its smoothness, the colour of her skin, the surprising brown of her nipples, her small breasts and the concave of her chest when she lay down, a tiny scar beneath her left ankle, a pimple on her back I saw the morning she died, her hips, her tongue, her lips and teeth, the hair above her lip, her ears, the roundness of her stomach and the inside of her thigh, her back arching as she laughed out loud.

Jim had been single since he was a teenager. He seemed to follow his parents' advice to set himself up before he settled down, then law and selfish comfort gave him the strength to resist their badgering for grandchildren. Lin opened up new possibilities. She undid his pessimism bit by bit, finding new symmetries every day. They were both born in the Year of the Sheep, she told him. "I'm a fire sheep," she gloated. "You are earth."

Jim had worked with somebody who killed himself. The dead boy had been the most popular person in the office. He was a boyish man who was beautiful to everyone. Unlike his co-workers, in shock afterwards, Jim never felt this death as a loss. Now, as he struggles to hold a picture of Lin's face in his mind, Alan's broad features and easy smile grin back at him from the grave.

This is how Jim remembers his wife's face: a mess of blood and broken bone, her jaw pushed through her cheek, one eye missing where her face was shaved off by metal and glass, the other pushed back into her skull.

Before this

Lin washes Jim's hair over the bathtub. She squeezes the towel around his head and ties it into a loose turban. His naked body draped over the bath. She runs her hand along his prominent backbone, contained by his tightly stretched skin.

After this

Logging on late on the night of Lin's funeral, a thermos of his mother's bitter Chinese herbs beside his keyboard, Jim sits at the entrance to the chat room. He remembers the fluttered stomach when he sat there with Lin at his side, typing her whispered answers on the screen.

Who was he, Jim asked himself, in this realm? Was he Lin, as her nipples were touched by a stranger known only as Diaz? Or as she laughed at the anatomical incongruity of Diaz's latest suggestion? Or was he Diaz, watching as his wife touched herself, the words from somebody else, the actions for him? But mostly he didn't question his position in the sex-play equation that ended in breathy sex with Lin.

In the second week of their online affair, Diaz had written:

<Diaz> I don't take cyber seriously, but sometimes you get the feeling that something more is going on. Do you know what I mean? Between us, I mean.

Lin quickly took over the keyboard.

<May/August> Yes I know, but don't rush things. You are 5000 miles away.

<Diaz> I'd travel for you, guapa.

<May/August> Cyber relationships aren't real.

<Diaz> Maybe. No? I don't do anybody else here, do u?

Lin looked anxiously across at Jim. He reached across her and typed.

<May/August> That's for us to know and...

Jim had typed three dots, then exited the private chat.

Where is Diaz now? It's been four days since Lin's death, so Diaz wouldn't be feeling neglected. They'd been chatting once, sometimes twice a week for nine months.

The room was almost full. Jim double-clicks on Diaz's name.

<May/August> Hello Diaz. Busy?

<Diaz> Waiting for you.

<May/August> Things have changed.

<Diaz> A better lover?

<May/August> No, something different.

Jim is tempted to exit, disconnect. He doesn't type for a minute, time enough for Diaz to type three requests.

<Diaz> What different?

<Diaz> You still there, May?

<Diaz> ????

Jim types.

<May/August> Still here.

<Diaz> I can handle rejection.

<May/August> Not rejection.

<Diaz> Then it can't be too bad. Tell me. You losing your computer or something? Can I compose you long sex letters and send them snail.

<May/August> No, not that.

<Diaz> although I like this way better. I'm getting good at writing one-handed.

Jim stares at his computer screen, not finding the words.

<May/August>

<May/August> May is dead.

<Diaz> So who are you now May?

<May/August> This is August.

<Diaz> Don't tell me any more. I don't want details.

Jim sits staring at the words on the screen. He wanted to tell Diaz. Diaz was the only one who came close to understanding what Jim had lost. Diaz posted a final message before leaving the room.

<Diaz> This is weird.

You said it, thought Jim.

20 minutes later

Jim stays logged into the chat room, half-watching the conversations that scroll down the screen. Diaz's name reappears.

<Diaz> Hi May/August. I'm back. Private me?

Jim double clicks on Diaz's name. A question is waiting for him.

<Diaz> Were you always there with May? When we chatted.

<May/August> Mostly. Not always.

<Diaz> When you say she is dead do you mean gone? Did she exist. Is this when you tell me that I've been talking with you all along?

<May/August> She was real. She really died.

<Diaz> I think I know when you weren't around

<May/August> What? You mean during chats? How?

<Diaz> There were times, not usually nights, when May would be there and she was always more standoffish. Flirtatious, but not going all the way. And the words? Yours?

<May/August> Over half. Especially lately. Often she called things out which I usually typed in.

<Diaz> You gay?

<May/August> I don't think so.

<Diaz> I am.

<May/August> What?

<Diaz> Gay. I sleep with men IRT, and occasionally women.

<May/August> I don't understand.

<Diaz> In Real Time.

<May/August> Not that. I mean, are you GAY? But you were with May twice a week. Why? Joke?

<Diaz> No joke. I sometimes wondered if May was a man. It was strange at first that May was a woman, but it was sexy. End of story. She (and you) knew how to touch me and keep me there with your words. Really dead?

<May/August> Yes.

<Diaz> When?

<May/August> Four days ago.

<Diaz> You poor guy. What now?

<May/August> I'm not sure, but I want to talk again. Soon. OK?

<Diaz> Sure. Friday?

Before this

At night in bed Jim and Lin would sometimes talk about Diaz. They knew his physical appearance through their online meetings and both were impressed with his consistency. If he was lying, he had a good memory. They knew his weight, height, chest, waist and hip measurements, he had one nipple pierced, and a trail that ran from above his penis to cover his chest with silky black hair. They knew he had a goatee, that his thin face was dominated by his almond-shaped eyes with their black irises, long lashes and thick eyebrows.

Jim discovered a pleasure in Diaz's easy masculinity. Sometimes he thought he wanted to be Diaz. Sometimes he thought of it as a geometry of values in which Diaz wanting Lin equalled Jim's augmented self-esteem ($L+D=J^2$).

The questions Diaz asked about Lin's body were always about a sexual scene they were playing out.

<Diaz> Your nipples? What color?

How much, Jim wondered, could anything between May/August and Diaz be real? They only

had words. How different was this from flesh-and-blood configurations?

Friday

Jim comes back to the chat room. He enters the room as August, ignoring the several greetings made to him. A moment later, he is dragged into a private room by Diaz.

<Diaz> Hi August.

<August> Hello Diaz. How are you?

<Diaz> Better than the other day. How u doing?

<August> Getting by.

<Diaz> I don't know what you are going through, but if my missing May is one thousandth of yours, you must be out of your mind.

<August> I think I am.

<Diaz> Sorry I freaked out the other day. I still don't think I want to know about the details.

<August> That's fine. I thought I needed to talk to you about it, but I don't anymore. I think I want to remember May as she was. I think I want to remember you as you were with May, or with us. OK to say US?

<Diaz> Definitely OK to say US. Me too! I feel same. So?

<August> So I guess it's goodbye.

<Diaz> Or goodbye for now? Open for future. See how things go.

<August> Thanks. We'll talk again.

<Diaz> Ciao August.

<<Diaz has left the chat room or is ignoring you>>

Jim knows that Diaz isn't ignoring him. He closes down the computer. Lin's face appears before him, a complicit smile on her lips like the day they re-met in the university courtyard. He pulls the covers back from the bed and slides in. He feels her cool body next to his. ■

31

Kully Inges
from *A Typographic Manifestation of
Sexual Evolution*

Did you just
look at me

András Gerevich Tiresias's Confession

"Sometimes I wake from dreams
and I have no idea what I am,
old or young, boy or girl.

I have to touch myself
to check: the only evidence is
my sweating body in the damp bed."

Tiresias sat facing me. He'd been
walking his dog, I'd been running.
Both of us slumped on a bench.

"It has long ceased to matter whether
it is light or dark. The inner clock
that knew the time of day has stopped.

It's years since I lived in the present,
only in prophecies and myths;
I can't find my way in the street."

He lit a cigarette and scratched his dog
behind the ear. "András, if I could
talk about it, just this once perhaps...

In my dreams I am always a woman,
wild and desirable, and wholly out of reach,
adored and admired by men.

I play with my breasts in my dreams,
my skin soft and delicate. Light trembles
throughout the dream-sequence."

He scratched his shin with his white stick,
the skin was peeling off his hands, his face,
the dog had found a hedgehog to play with.

"The loveliest time of my life seems
so short, a matter of minutes now.
It was when men still desired me."

He gave a deep sigh, spat, looked away.
"If you enjoy being a man, be careful;
you could at any time turn into a woman.

The line between them is too narrow.
Perhaps if I become pregnant,
I could still be a woman, a mother."

Translated from Hungarian by *George Szirtes*

Louise Hercules Branded

And you will drink from the blistered apples of my lips
until numb
till you can neither run nor flee with the rapid migration of
clear thoughts to mind
as if, deaf, stunned and blinded by the reasons that you seek
because you are weak and cannot reach above or beyond
the safest words to
make me stop
pause... on the cusp of every sweetened breath that impales
the chest in the density
of now
where no vows made in haste can chase you from my torn
yet splendid claws.

33

Reginald Shepherd

The Drowned Man's Story

The press of well oiled bodies in the pool
relaxing after the bench press, the five mile run
around the indoor track and the lunchtime
handball games. What could I want
from cocks and asses obvious
in black trunks, the well proportioned noses
and full lips? What sense can I make of all that
skin, textured rippling rags containing bones?
The ones drinking Lite beers after their laps,
the ones bragging about their fucks. Even the ones
discussing Heidegger, who don't want to be thought
limp-wristed.

It's never beauty
poised on the highest diving board, my stare
stiff as my dick while heated water parts
for him, clings to him when he climbs out,
a gleam of black hair coiled to his dripping forehead.
They don't exist, no matter how the droplets glisten
on tan backs: I believe because they are
absurd. Wanting to become that element, a part
of what I'd want to part for me, I jump in after
they've all left. Rinsed clean by chlorine, I touch
bottom (all they've left), watch strong calves glide
over my head again. It seems that everything's gone red.

34



Stephen Mead
Details from
"The Arena"

A Modern Romance

Theresa Heath

“Look, here’s the deal. You can move into the flat and I can help you, support you financially while you do your PhD. We get on really well, don’t we? We’re fond of each other and we have fun and, well, we’ve slept together and that’s always been really nice, hasn’t it? We could do all those lovely things together, like take interesting holidays and talk about books – we could go out for nice meals and have great dinner parties, and go to the theatre and to films, and drive to the beach at weekends and go out for breakfast and buy the Sunday papers and never read them. I’d even turn a blind eye if you wanted to, you know, sleep with other women from time to time.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Deadly serious. I understand that it’s not exactly conventional, but, well, to tell you the truth, to hell with conventionality. I think this would work for us.”

“But we’re not in love.”

“We love each other, though.”

“Daniel, I – you deserve so much better than this.”

“Don’t patronise me. I’m thirty years old, I’m a big boy. And I’ve thought this through. I’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Daniel, I – for fuck’s sake, I don’t know *what* to say.”

“Sleep on it. Promise me you’ll do that at least.”

The city sweats, sleepless and itchy – agitates under an unnaturally oppressive, un-English heat. The hottest June on record. The moon is the kind of golden colour she remembers from visits to the family in Sicily and barbecues on the beach, and she feels nostalgic, displaced, out of sorts. It is a very hot night and in this kind of temperature, ideas cook.

The objective fact remains that this is no mean offer. This man is intelligent. He’s generous, funny, erudite, sharp, well-liked and at the top of his game professionally, and it’s an interesting game, arts reviewer for a good newspaper. He’s an engaging man, unaffectedly doleful, endearingly lugubrious in a wonderfully charming way. His smile shines. He is by no means unattractive, and he’s right – they have had sex, screwed, fucked, what have you, and it’s always been – nice. Sometimes marvellous. Exciting,

even. Afterwards she’d felt calm rather than confused, lying in bed with him, legs hooked over his hips. Then coffee and papers. It would be a good life.

What is she thinking? She’s a feminist, young, ambitious, beautiful in her own way, like a graceful ostrich, all long neck and big eyes, but plagued by insecurity, indecision and right now – most hampering of all – relative poverty. She is unable to fund her studies, and funding is hard to come by – she is good, but is she good enough? More importantly, what the bloody hell will she do if she doesn’t get the cash?

Another hot weekend, this time out of the city in a university town. She sits on the floor of her best friend’s room. The best friend’s name is Lucy, and she is studying for her own PhD in Medieval History, specialising in some much-maligned man from the period. She can never remember quite what it is Lucy’s medieval man is supposed to have done, but vaguely recalls it has something to do with sodomy.

She stretches her legs out on the threadbare carpet and says to Lucy: “The problem is, I’m just not as clever as you, and I’m not assured of getting a grant. Without it, I’m screwed – condemned to a life of bookselling and bloody EFL teaching.”

“Come on, you don’t know you won’t get anything. You’re good – you’ll work it out somehow.”

“And just who’s going to give me a huge wedge of cash to study Queer Theory for three years?”

“Some rich gay benefactor?” Lucy says. “Elton John?”

“Or Daniel?”

Lucy eyeballs her friend.

“This is purely hypothetical, isn’t it?”

“Would taking Daniel up on his offer be a) highly conventional, a return to outmoded traditional values and a regression in terms of feminism, gender equality and so on...,” she pauses, breathes, looks around the room, a typically Cambridge-student room, beige, uninspiring walls, Blu Tack and photographs, feather boa, chipped bookcase and pot plant. “Or b) actually very unconventional and even progressive, given that I’d be putting relationships second to my career, choosing to cohabit with someone I like and respect,

thereby contradicting the concept of romantic love, the popularity of which we know is an unobtainable modern convention. Maybe it's even post-modern."

There is no pause.

"A," says Lucy. "There's no way this could ever be seen as progressive. It's not post-modern, or even post-romantic. It's not post anything. God, you and your bloody post this and that... and don't even get started on the post-sexual wasteland again."

She laughs in spite of herself. Maybe she's analysing this too much – hypothetically, of course. They finish the bottle of wine, unearth another, and move on to other things.

But it would be a good life.

The problem is, she's been hurt recently, and is still raw. Frayed around the edges. And this one really knocked her sideways, threw her for a loop, pulled the rug out from under her feet, fucked her up royally.

She'd spent the previous ten years professing that, "you can never fall as madly, stupidly, obsessively, unrealistically in love as you do at seventeen" – and then it had happened. Twenty-seven years old and it happened again. Of all the fucking unfair shitty things to happen. And now she's tired. She's tired and she's lonely, and a bit fed up, and incredibly disillusioned. That kind of impossible, desperate love, if it happens to her again, will destroy her. It will kill her in the end.

"Yes."

"What? What 'yes'? Hang on, you mean... what – really?"

"Yes."

"This isn't you," her friends say.

No. I've decided to be someone else.

And so they do it. And for all intents and purposes, they are happy. They do go on nice holidays, meet similarly-minded people, establish a comfortable, interesting and lively social circle, invite these people over for dinner, discuss books, films, go to the theatre. They are comfortably bohemian. They buy organic and shop in markets. They share a car and vote green.

They do spontaneous, romantic things for one another. They buy two desks and put each under a window, and play The Beach Boys while they work. When her first paper is published in a good journal, they go to Mauritius to celebrate. All her friends love him, and her family are just relieved she's not gay. And when they make love, she can almost believe she is *in* love. In love as his fingers are inside her, and he gently, perfectly, makes her come beautifully. It is often exciting, it is interesting and easy, sometimes she even keeps her eyes open when he comes.

Sometimes she can bear to be touched, but not to touch, and then her orgasm is fuelled by a slight under-

current of self-disgust as she pushes and pulls him into her, trying to connect again, ground herself, reach the calm plateau of the after-place. On mornings after nights such as these, she wakes up in a panic, a gasp, as she instinctively reaches over to his side, expecting him to be gone, to have guessed, to have left her. But he's not, he hasn't, he never would.

They talk as they fall asleep, and it is easy to wake up with him.

(Occasionally, when drunk, she gets the razors out, the antiseptic ointment, cotton pads and plasters and etches confusion into her thighs, a confusion she didn't know was still there, little surprised slices of self-loathing that turn red, then white, then red, then white again. But it doesn't happen often, and he's always very supportive, never judgemental. He puts it down to her little bouts of depression.)

Occasionally, she sleeps with women. It is never particularly satisfying, and afterwards she feels sometimes better, sometimes worse. Sometimes both. She chooses women for various reasons, but never men. After all, to sleep with a man would render the whole enterprise a sham, because isn't she with Daniel for more than just support and friendship? Doesn't she honestly believe that he is most unique among men and really, she has never met anyone (male) who comes close.

She used to dream of the beautiful female academic who would appear from nowhere – or maybe a library – and sweep her off her feet, make it all better, make her realise: "So *this* is what it's all about – I do have the capacity for it, I'm not dead on the inside, hurrah, thank fuck, let's have a party."

But co-habiting with a (male) partner precludes any advances that may or may not be made, and she's never been a girl's girl. Men, yes. Men by the bucket-load have asked her for dates, wanted to spend time with her, be with her, love her, fuck her, but women she attracts much less.

Even when she goes to girl bars with the pure intent of sex, women very rarely come onto her. They seem wary of her, unsure, assume she's just the straight mate, or worse, that urban predator, the Bi-Curious Straight Woman.

(Maybe she should cut her hair, get a trendy lesbian mullet.)

And now she's given up hoping. She's seven years into this. Thirty-four years old! Where *did* the time go? Maybe it was all just immature fantasy. Maybe you just don't fall in love like you do at twenty seven?

The professional situation is not ideal. How to be a Queer Theorist when everyone assumes you're straight? There is always the added bother of that extra mile, the tricky course run by the "straight who self-defines as queer," which frustratingly she's not – straight, that is. But how do you define yourself as Bisexual when your partner is a person of the opposite sex? By walking down the street holding hands

with Daniel, she may as well tattoo STRAIGHT on her forehead. And if she were to walk down the same street holding hands with a woman, the world would conclude: Lesbian. So what does the bisexual do? Walk down that same street with a sex on each arm? The same World might conclude: Polygamist! Or even: Swinger! Or perhaps just: Slut!

And then Daniel becomes very sad. No longer delightfully doleful, just sad. Her latter-day malcontent has gone – now her adorable Malvolio is thoroughly miserable. He spends two months trying to conceal it, but by now she knows him too well. Seven years and they have reached the stage where it is impossible to conceal such enormous deposits of emotion. Some people find it gets easier to keep things hidden, but theirs has been a good relationship based on honesty, and it is very apparent that Daniel is very sad, and he won't talk about it.

Then he does.

He has met someone. She is in love with him. He is going to leave. He's sorry.

This wasn't supposed to happen – this was never part of the deal. This is, in fact, what she yells at him that night, which is also the first time she's felt impassioned in years.

"The deal was that we'd both forfeit love," she screams at him, becomes slightly hysterical. "The idea was we'd both forfeit all that crap for security, companionship and support and – for fuck's sake Daniel!"

He suddenly looks angry and shouts back. This is the first time she has seen him shout.

"No, that was *your* part of the deal! Mine was to be in love with someone who didn't love me back, who couldn't even fucking look at me when we had sex."

"Daniel – *you* fucking asked *me*."

They're both crying now.

"*You* fucking asked *me*, Daniel."

"I wanted to be with you. I was desperate to be with you. I thought if I could just get you to be with me I could make you love me."

"Daniel, I do love you."

"But not like I wanted."

"In that case, I went into this blind!" Her voice is breaking, becoming incoherent on the high notes, thick and blurred through tears and snot. "This was never a fair deal, because I didn't really know what the terms were."

He's not sobbing now, but tears are falling, almost as an aside, a reflex action. His expression is hopeless in a way she has never seen before. He is always the relentless optimist – even when he is being cynical and depressive – and it terrifies her to see. Absolutely fucking terrifies her – there is a finality to it she knows she can never bend or assuage.

"Don't tell me you didn't know," he says. "Did you really not know? How could you not know? Fucking tell me you didn't know."

And, of course, she can't.

Later, she thinks: Is love ever equal? Is it always a pay off, an unbalanced bargain? Should one party always, inevitably, invariably, expect to be a little less loved in order to keep that little bit more? Must the other party – the adored one – always make do with that little bit less in order to keep – what? A little more power? Greater peace of mind? A more complete sense of self? Self control and security – what?

She moves out.

She has her PhD.

She has a career.

She does not have Daniel.

This is what happens. ■

Kully Inges

from *A Typographic Manifestation of Sexual Evolution*

The Memory of Showers

Char March

38

The German hasn't said anything for a while – which suits me.

I am struggling to stay in the day. This has been happening most mornings – since Shamila's funeral. The air has become something it is not possible to breathe, something hostile.

The German and I are perched on high stools, either end of my long granite worktop, hunched over espressos. Between us, the coffee maker hisses and spits.

I sit, pretending to be a real person. Try to pretend I am capable of drinking coffee, of smoking a cigarette, of holding a conversation – of functioning in any way.

The weird thing is that the German got through to me last night. I felt alive for the first time since Shami was told "unfortunately the lymph system is now involved."

My Dad taught me German as soon as I could gurggle. He loathed it. Spat it out as if it was burning ashes. But he chanted: "Always know the language of your enemies."

The shock for them – for Dad and Mutti – was that I loved it. Its barked consonants and throaty operatic vowels. I haven't, however, told her – this blonde German sitting bashfully in my kitchen – that I speak her language. That is too intimate. I much preferred to keep her floundering last night – leave her trying to stretch her Business English round Kama Sutra suggestions – than confess. The fact my tongue can fluently conjugate every German verb is somehow much more intimate than everything else I did with it last night.

I see her looking around this stripped-bare space I have created for myself – my eyrie, my very own Adlerhorst. I presume she's already clocked that the bathroom fittings are German – their lever mixer taps are just so brutally elegant, and their loos flush properly. How come in Britain we've still not devised a flush that really does the job?

She is presumably taking in the clean economy of line in my kitchen, the polished chrome cupboards, the designed sparseness – and presumably feeling at home.

"This is your... home?" she asks.

"Yes – what did you think it was?"

"It is so... bare. It is a feeling like a factory."

Ah, dear old German bluntness. And there was me thinking she'd relate to it all.

"Oh – I am sorry. This was not the... correct thing to say."

She reaches a supposedly reassuring hand out towards me. I jump up – I definitely don't want contact. The right to touch was last night; this is now, and therefore, very different.

"Shower – I need a shower."

I pad down the limestone-tiled corridor into the wet-room. Lock its door – for the first time. I don't turn on the shower; instead, I stare into the mirror. Search in it – I am trying to find... something. Can't.

I go and stand over by the door. Listen. What's she doing out there? Who the fuck is she, anyhow? Picked up for a crazy bet last night – out of it on poppers at Queens – Becky and Irina egging me on: "Do your bit for reconciliation! It'll take you out of yourself – go on!" Both of them desperate for me to reconnect – with something... someone.

She could be rifling through my stuff, helping herself to DVDs, to the bag of dope in the Smeg, snooping in my palmtop. I listen harder at the door – flatten my ear against the thick larch. I hear nothing – I get the weird feeling that maybe she's doing exactly the same on the other side. That our ears are pressed only 8cm apart. Several minutes pass.

It is three years ago. Dana and I are standing on the cracked concrete of Nordhausen concentration camp's parade ground trying to light cigarettes. Dana – a pal from Uni – has also suddenly decided to find out "where things happened."

It is a warm Spring day. All around us is a loud and perky chorus of randy birds, and the sough of wind through the pines. The grass, poking up through the mass of cracks in the huge slabs of concrete, is studded with dancing heidenröslein. But, despite the balmy scene, our hands are shaking and white – it takes several attempts to get our Gitanes lit.

In clear line of sight, and only about half a kilome-

tre away, down a long, lightly-wooded slope is the pretty little East German town of Nordhausen. This is where my Dad was born and lived with his family. Dana's Mum grew up near here. We look down into it, watch the butcher using a long pole to close his striped awning – for it is half-day in Nordhausen. He stops to chat to the owner of the little hotel where we stayed last night – Frau Khöler. She is watering her window-boxes – regulation geraniums. She made us so very welcome – until I asked her for directions to the KZ.

And now, despite Frau Khöler's "directions", we are standing, dragging on our Gitanes, on the parade ground in Nordhausen Konzentrationslager, also called Dora-Mittelbau for, like Windscale/Sellafield, these sorts of places need a variety of names.

We have just spent four hours in the carefully reconstructed Schlafhütte that is the site's museum. Inside are huge maps – all original – showing the location of hundreds of KZ attached to virtually every German town – and no-one knew a thing about them. And there are half a dozen highly-polished glass cases under piercing halogen lights exhibiting a plain metal button with a scratched design of a flower, a pair of shoes with no laces and no soles, some smudged charcoal sketches on torn yellow newspaper: faces behind wire, trees without branches. And in the one tall glass cabinet, a suit of the grey striped KZ prisoner uniform – in subdued, slightly blue lighting. In case it rots. They have not cleaned it, but they have ironed it – into ludicrously military creases.

For four hours Dana and I have been searching through the records – the meticulously German records. All written with a fine-nibbed pen in ink that has aged to the colour of old blood. The records are all facsimiles now – on touch-screens. I am glad. I would not have wanted to touch the actual pages these ghoully clerks had written on. That they had run their fingers over, breathed over, had their what-they-were-going-to-do-at-the-weekend chat over. I would not have wanted to touch this page where he or she had cursed as a splash of Ersatzkaffee smudged their neat Fraktur script. I pretend that the thick glass of the touch-screen protects me. That it prevents the poison seeping into me from these columns, four to a page, of painstakingly tallied names – all the Jewish Alps (the Rosenbergs, the Geldbergs, the Steinbergs) all studded with Jewish flora (the Rosens, the Geldblums, the Baums).

We have found sixteen members of my father's side of the family amongst the lists. Of these, five were selected for Work Duty. The others, marked for Immediate Special Treatment, were screamed into lines, into cattle trucks, each recorded as they set out on their various terminal journeys. Some to Theresienstadt, some to Treblinka, some to Bergen-Belsen. Some to Berlin – to Sachsenhausen, where

twenty-three of my Mutti's side of the family saw their last daylight.

The German calls through the door – her sudden nearness startling me so much I jump, cracking my elbow on the basalt washbasin. My arm zings with pain, my fingers are numb. I clutch my elbow, swearing under my breath.

"I am sorry – I am having now to leave, already."

Why do Krauts sprinkle every speech with "already"? It makes them sound like Yanks.

I stay silent.

"I have a business appointment very soon – I must prepare."

I tiptoe carefully across the floor and turn on the blast of the shower, then creep back to press my ear against the door. There is a long pause. I keep hoping for the sound of my front door shutting. I wait and wait.

Dana has counted off seven members of her family who were "dealt with" here; the other twelve were "sent East" – perhaps in the same cattle trucks as the people who would have become my grandparents, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins – to Sachsenhausen and Bergen-Belsen. Three of hers survived – she has told me this as if ashamed, as if guilty. I couldn't think of much to say, just – *good*, and *I'm glad*, and, much later, *did you get to know them?*

We've been trying to have a laugh about it. But this is surprisingly hard – even for us. For we did get an outrageous reputation at Uni. One time – very high on magic mushrooms – we staggered down to the local M&S and went goose-stepping round their car park giving the Nazi salute and shouting: "Bloody inefficient Germans! Look, there's still masses of us left." It was only the "us" that stopped us from getting arrested. We'd thought it was the middle of the night, but time being a highly elastic commodity when mushrooms have been imbibed, it was in fact 5pm on a Friday evening, and we had quite an audience.

But this trip, there's been none of that. Just a lot of silence – and numbness. And none of it feels... right. I've come here – at last. And I've found pretty much what I'd expected to find. Now what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to feel?

I take out my mobile and phone Shamila. She'd wanted to come. I'd said no. I catch her between meetings. We have been together just six months. I walk across the parade ground away from Dana so I can join in the oogy moments of lovers' chat without feeling like a total nerd.

It is unreal. I can hear Shamila's cranky shredder chuntering in the background. Around me the birds are still singing their hormone frenzy. I look at my boots, slowly crunching over the concrete slabs. I stop beside a particularly bright clump of heiden-röslein. I talk into the phone and in my head is a per-

fect image of Shami sitting in her office with the shredder to her right. It sits beside her over-sized desk on which we made love the second time we'd met. We'd hung her black robe across the window in her office door at eleven in the morning while her outer office was full of other barristers wandering in and out, quizzing the clerk about their new cases.

I tell Shami what we've found. Just the bare statistics. I know she won't be able to find much to say, so I rush on. I tell her about our "directions" from Frau Khöler – how she'd sent us on a 40-minute train ride, and then we had to walk about seven kilometres on unsigned country roads to find it. I tell her how we'd stopped at two farms on the way, how cheery the farmers had been, how both had slammed their doors on us when we asked the way to the camp. How we'd found a couple of KZ signposts, wrenched out of the ground, lying half-burnt in a ditch. How, after that, we'd sung a couple of verses of "Spring-time, for Hit-ler, and Ger-man-y! Win-ter, for Po-land and France!" until the gloom of the pine forest silenced us. And how, when we'd finally – silently – walked out across the crumbling parade ground and looked around, we'd spotted the little town centre of Nordhausen – and Frau Khöler's hotel – down a wooded slope. How the KZ was, in fact, only a kilometre from our hotel.

I tell her about watching the butcher pull his blinds down, and Frau Khöler watering her geraniums. And she keeps saying *My god, my god* and, as usual, I wonder which god she's referring to – and what Allah's attitude to Jewish lesbians might be. And then it's time for Shami's next meeting. So we tell each other how much we love/miss/want each other. And she repeats how much she wishes I'd let her come out there, too – that she could at least have held me. And then, because we've only been together for six months, we say again how much we love/need/want/miss/lust after each other. And I finally manage to cut through the goodbyes to actually sign off.

Dana calls out to me in her slow Brum: "Loré – he's trying to tell us something." Next to her is the earnest young museum assistant. He'd helped me find my family name, all sixteen times, in the archive lists – I am hoping he hasn't found more. I trot back, past the rusted-shut cattle truck stranded on rails hidden by heidenröslein, to find out what's up.

And so it was, sixty years after virtually our entire families disappeared into the ovens, Dana and I were told by the shame-faced young German that: "I apologise, but my superior has insisted I inform you of the rule. It is forbidden to smoke in the museum vicinity' for it is here all buildings of wood, and there is fire danger."

And we stared at him open-mouthed and he was – literally – wringing his hands in abject apology.

And Dana and I looked at each other – and we laughed.

It wasn't a very healthy laugh, and it didn't last long. But we managed it.

I am fed up of waiting – the German must have gone by now. My un-numb hand is reaching out for the door-handle when a sheet of paper is pushed carefully under the door. I leap back.

In small neat script it says: *Thank you for last night. I am having to return to Berlin tomorrow. I regret this much. Would you come this evening for dinner with me? I hope.*

Yours sincerely, Gertraude Bieber

Bieber! What a great name for her – does it have the same connotations in Germany? I doubt it. Being Teutonic, she'll think: beaver equals industrious. Well, I can vouch for her being industrious in the beaver department – I am feeling pretty pummelled this morning, in a very pleasant sort of way.

I scan her note again. Its Germanic brevity, its efficiency. It gives her room number and the telephone number at her hotel – Leeds' attempt at the standard of the Dorchester. I chuck it in the wastebin.

I hear my front door shut and am immediately out of the wet-room. I glance round, try to decide if anything's been touched – taken. I race into my office – everything is in the same chaos as I left it. My computer's fan isn't warm. I wander back into the living room, and it's then I see it: the photo of me and Shamila has been moved – taken from the low shelving and put beside the Bose.

I snatch it up, rubbing at the glass and frame with a silk cushion from the sofa. And then I'm on my knees moaning and rocking backwards and forwards, hot and sticky with tears and feeling like a complete cliché.

What was I thinking – letting a German into my flat, into my bed... into me?

There was a pool of Dana's vivid vomit on the bathmat for Frau Köhler to clean up. And Dana was snoring in the other twin bed, wrapped around an empty bottle of Kirsch. But I couldn't sleep that night, so I wandered round the tightly-shuttered town. It was quiet. All of them sleeping peacefully. I wanted to hurl their pretty pretty windowboxes of geraniums into the river.

Eventually, I tried to get back to Frau Köhler's, but I missed my way, found myself coming out onto the cobbles of a small square. Glistening under the one ornate streetlamp was a strange bright-red figure over three metres high, carrying a drawn sword. He was made of fibreglass – a replacement for the ancient wooden original now in some immaculate Volksmuseum, no doubt. I didn't know the name of this moustachioed king with the huge staring eyes –

but I did know him. He was the only thing my Dad had ever told me about Nordhausen.

It was a Saturday morning and the week after my eighth birthday. We were walking down The Headrow in Leeds together – we were supposed to be meeting Mum, as usual, at the Market Café for “The Best Bacon Butties in Yorkshire.”

A circus had come to town. Circus people, with enormous manikins of clowns and trapeze artists and tigers teetering on their shoulders paraded among the shoppers, handing out leaflets. I was laughing and pointing at them. Dad was holding my hand and chuckling along with me as they reeled up and down the pavement. Then, from round a corner staggered a different manikin: a huge bright red ringmaster. And my father – my rational, quiet, 58-year-old Dad – screamed and threw himself on the ground. He was shaking and sobbing and people clustered around immediately – like he was maybe one of the circus acts. A heavy-set woman bustled to the front – said she was St John’s Ambulance. I stood off to one side, looking on – scared and ashamed. There was snot all over the front of my Dad’s shirt, and he’d torn the knee of his slacks.

When he finally came round, he was humiliated by all the attention, kept apologising – something I’d never heard him do before. He was having such a struggle getting away from the first-aider woman that he flagged down a cab, even though we’d both got day-passes for the bus. An unheard of extravagance.

He told the driver our address in Harehills and then sat staring straight ahead. I knew not to ask questions. I worried about Mum waiting for us at the Market Café – eating all 3 of our bacon butties.

As we passed the kulfi factory on Nippet Lane, Dad said: “You must never tell your mother.”

He didn’t turn and look at me. And he spoke in German – something he never did outside our German lessons in the secrecy of our living room.

Even then I was into bargaining, so I said – in my best German: “I promise never her to tell, Dad. But you must me, what just happened, tell.”

He gave me a sharp stare – one that would normally have had me quailing, but I’d just seen him sobbing facedown on the pavement, and covered in bogies, so, today, it didn’t work so well.

It was then he told me about the Nordhausen statue. And just the briefest details: being hauled to that square, under that statue, on the night they were all “sent East.” That it had been his 21st birthday. That the ringmaster manikin had simply looked similar and: “Gave me a bit of a fright.”

And then Dad came to his senses and got the cab to stop at the junction with Coldcotes Avenue and said we could walk the rest of the way home.

Mutti got home an hour later. She was seething at being left sitting like a spare part. Dad’s lame excuse

that he’d “just forgotten” started her into her usual frenzy of angry cleaning. She came downstairs from a dusting blitz, lugging the Ali Baba washing basket (a strange Arabian intruder in our little household). And, as she was cramming fistfuls of washing into the twin-tub, she found the rip in his trouser knee.

She looked from me to Dad (who was testing the dampness of his tomatoes compost on the living room windowsill) and back to me. Then she ordered Dad out to sweep the yard and fasten up the washing line – and pinioned me against the juddering twin-tub and got it all out of me.

Afterwards she didn’t speak. She just nodded several times – as if to remind herself of something – then told me to go upstairs and get on with my homework. She hadn’t even brought our bacon butties back for us.

The next Saturday, Mutti had suddenly acquired a wig and I was taken (albeit by bus) to my first ever synagogue and made to sit up straight – not even allowed to peer down from the women’s gallery – through the whole dismal thing. And all that Sunday, and for six Sundays afterwards, Mutti and Dad dragged me round estate agents in Moortown until they found somewhere “suitable”.

Two months later we’d moved and I’d changed schools. From the wild and fun Harehills Primary with bright shalwar-kameez-clad girls playing footie, to the severely uniformed Jewish Girls’ School in Moortown. We never had bacon butties again, and Mutti’s life became a never-ending churn of kosher this and Shabbat that and polishing the *menorah* and putting up a *mezuzah* beside the front door and on and on, while Dad and I retreated in our very different ways.

That night in Nordhausen I’d seen it for myself, or rather, a fibreglass replica of the one my Dad, and all his family – my family, the family I never knew, never met – had stood shuddering under that Kristallnacht. So, instead of going back to Frau Köhler’s, I walked up to the camp from the square.

I’ve stopped crying. I carry the photo of me and Shami into the kitchen and put her by the window. I open the Smeg. I push around in the bag of Harvey Nick’s goodies my secretary brought for me three days ago. Everyone is so concerned for my health – and I am so sick of saying “thank you”. I tear off a few bits of damp *pain au chocolat*. Then, still trying to chew, go and stand in the shower.

The steam pounds over me.

I had walked across the parade ground again, and stood beside where the Soviet troops had found the last hurried mass graves. And I had tried to remember the Kaddish prayer – and failed, and cried, nothing unseemly, without a sound. The birds still sang around me while tears fell onto the pine needles.

And I felt gutted that what I'd wanted so desperately, had actually happened – it had, after all, been a very deliberate campaign: as soon as I left school, I moved out of the claustrophobia of Moortown and deliberately horrified my parents on my next visit – swathed in a Palestinian headscarf, clutching my plastic Buddha handbag, and talking about my new all-day-Saturday job. Mum had wept and gone to repolish the *menorah*. Dad had yelled at me in Yiddish and sworn at me in German and begged me in English. I'd said I was fed up with the whole thing, but especially with the silences, and that they had to move on, and – if they couldn't – I already had.

I'd learnt T'ai Chi, gone to carol concerts, boycotted Jaffa, written a humanist funeral into my will. I'd never been back to synagogue. And then I'd fallen in love with a Muslim. And Shamila, before her body had cooled, had been snatched from me by her family and turned into ashes.

And here I am, standing in a shower, washing off the remnants of a German Catholic dyke, and having flashbacks to the concentration camps... and wanting to hack that tender woman, who'd brought me back to life last night so fully and so completely unexpectedly, to bits. I want to shake answers from her, to demand retribution, to force out of her that her Dad had been in the SS and that they'd all known what was going on – all of them. And I spit out the *pain au chocolat* against the shower tiles.

I sit on the wet-room floor, just out of reach of the shower. I hold myself in my wet arms. Tell myself I will be okay. Tell myself that maybe I'll reach out a shaking hand, open the mouth of the wastebin, and pull out the crumpled ball of her note. ■

The Judges' Comments:

Ali Smith: This is a story which covers so much ground in so little space and with such a display of narrative control and scrupulous refusal to sentimentalise. Its strength and vulnerability are both remarkable. It has such clarity. Its ending is perfect pitch, really well-made. Yes.

Michael Arditti: The story covers a vast amount of historical, geographical, religious and, above all, emotional territory in a few thousand words. A young Jewish woman visiting Germany painfully recalls the horrors of her own and her family's past. Most shattering of her many recollections is that of her quiet, collected father's hysterical breakdown when a circus parades through their Yorkshire town. The narrator's attempt to come to terms with her childhood, her Muslim lover's death, and her sexual reawakening at the hands of a former enemy are brilliantly intertwined.



Robert Hamberger Wrestling the Angel

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.
Genesis Chapter 32 Verse 24

Open your eyes – I'll drown you
dive from a dizzying height
every feather
a gust from heaven
God's heron
to pierce your dream.

Our tussle wakes
my softest hailstones pepper your skin
I might be rain daring to lick your brow.

Dread prickles your beard
in our ballet of parry and shove.
I could snap you like a rib. Submit.

What measure of warrior are you
roping my stallion shoulders,
will against muscle bites against wings?

A fire line slinks the mountain.
My errand to bend your spine
trash your plea unravels.

My fingernails strum
the clustering hairs on your thigh.
Eat this ghosted blessing:

ache for paradise

I would be cloud

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The Judge's Comments:

Mark Doty: "Wrestling the Angel" is a remarkably sensuous poem; this heavenly messenger is one sexy visitor, and though angels are sometimes portrayed as genderless, there's no doubt that this one's male and on the dominant side, yet there's an energizing polarity in the way this poet has evoked his transformative, physical presence: "Our tussle wakes/my softest hailstones... I might be rain." The poem evokes Epstein's sculpture and the Biblical story without being overly dependent on either, creating its own memorably forceful, dynamic encounter of body and spirit.

Spawn of the Regime

Brynn Binnell

44

It's South Africa, 1977. The war in Angola is in full swing. Any white boys not in school or University have been drafted into the army to fight Communism for God and the white race in Africa. I'm twelve, so I don't need to worry.

It's 1977, Abba's "SOS" is in the air, it's in my bones... "SOS" hit me hard as I crossed the dance floor of seedy Uncle Ed's back street disco in Uitenhage. My mother had finally, after years of bad driving, managed to roll her silver VW Love Bug Beetle. First on the scene had been Uncle Ed, who'd taken us in and told us my stepfather could pick us up at his disco. So, there I was at that tender age crossing a disco floor on my way back from the loo when "SOS" burst out across the speakers and the lighting did its magic, the crystal ball turned hypnotically, bathing me in dazzling beams of light. There, in that crowded room, it hit me, not unlike an orgasm, like something snaking it's way right through me. Those introductory notes on the keyboard, especially at high volume, the thrill of the chords that follow is electrifying, just before the volume explodes on: "So when you're near me, darling, can't you hear me/SOS/The love you gave me, nothing else can save me/SOS."

It's 1977 though, and South Africa is reeling after the spectacular Soweto riots planted seeds of doubt in some minds that apartheid might not work out in the longer term. Leaning forward intently and glaring at the nation from behind black-rimmed specs, through Mom's new black and white TV, Prime Minister Balthazar Johannes "BJ" Vorster had issued yet another warning to the nation. I don't know what it was that time, but I remember him well, because my dad was a photographer and had taken pictures of him at the Hankie golf course, where he was a regular.

Dad got a shot with me standing next to "BJ", with his fatherly paw on my shoulder, the other resting on his golf stick. Aside from his ruthless control of the apartheid state, he was known in his younger years for having opposed South Africa's entry into the Second World War on the side of the Allies, arguing that Hitler's system was far preferable to the

Westminster parliamentary model. For his efforts, which included blowing up Allied military installations, he was interned for the rest of the war, but only to rise to glory in his later years – first as Prime Minister, then as State President.

Like the country of my birth, with its peculiar colour arrangements, my home town is a strange place, somewhere between pan-colour and 60s black-and-white photo-glamour. Technicolor – like in the brilliantly coloured "splash" screens for the big movie companies, yet not too psychedelic. For me, it's as if everything is coloured with the gentle orange, white and blue tones of the old apartheid flag.

Where I grew up, everyone had big gardens, there were flowers everywhere, and everyone we knew lived in big houses with expansive gardens supported by armies of domestic workers, always in the background, barely perceptible. For me, sepia tones don't work in childhood memories, because everything was so vividly coloured. The accompanying smells were vibrant and fresh, the stars glittered in the sky.... and when I closed my eyes there was a parallel universe going on behind my eyelids. What is it about bougainvillea that makes them permeate one's memories of the past, and remember the lazy summer childhood times of freedom in the sunshine? I remember purple and maroon ones.... yes, there were others, but the purple and maroon ones were somewhere near where we lived, and I don't think I've ever seen such bougainvillea since.

My story begins on a lovely summery day. I was doing what I enjoyed doing most at that age: getting tarted-out in my Granny's evening gowns, Mom's wigs, and my sister's shoes. I was lucky that my mom had "dreadful allergies" and claimed that she could only use Kanebo cosmetics. After the Soweto riots the previous year, the currency got shot to hell. But regardless of the expense, she kept the supply coming. As she put it, the ladies in our family have very fine complexions, and the Japanese Kanebo range, specially adapted for fine Oriental skins, was perfectly suited to them. I couldn't have agreed more.

I was also lucky to have had the grandmother I'd had. An incredibly glamorous creature who'd died young and left all her beautiful things to my mother (and indirectly and unknowingly to me!). She had been very slightly built, which was great for matching my size - and had what must have been one of the most spectacular wardrobes in the district.

This time, instead of parading around in front of the mirror, before the servants, or my sister and her friends, I decided it was time to get out and try something different. I'd hatched a plan and after hours of preening and fussing, I knew that I'd never looked this good in my life!

I crossed Sutherland Road to get to the Timms's house.

Knock, knock, knock, and in a flash, Auntie Avril was there. Ever vigilant, and as she told everyone who would listen afterwards, she'd seen the "lady" coming. Not the brightest button on the uniform, but always good-natured and good-humoured with us kids, she could be counted on for a laugh. This time was no laughing matter, though. From when she opened the door, I could see that I had her. She hadn't recognised me. This was fuel to my fire.

But first, a bit more about the Timms's.

Aside from television being new in Uitenhage in 1977, some people still didn't have telephones - and the Timms family had been among them. They'd announced their acquisition of one with a series of unwelcome phone calls, including pranks in the dead of night - Uncle Harry after a few drinks. The Timms's were always the last to get anything in our street. Now that they had a telephone, they still had a TV and car to go, but whether or not they would ever get there was not up for consideration at that stage. So their phone was their pride and joy, and all of us kids in the neighbourhood were given demos and allowed to make a quick call here and there "to see how it worked" - as if we didn't already know, but it was fun anyway, so we went along with it.

One of the few things the Timms's had that most of us didn't was a lava lamp. Theirs was in a faux gold container, the wax inside glowed brown in a sinister yellow treacle. We loved that lamp - and would be made to sit carefully and still in the forbidden guest lounge at the front of the house, hands washed, before it could be switched on, under strict adult supervision.

"Mrs Timms?" I asked coldly, from behind Granny's horn-rimmed, diamond-studded glasses, and holding a feather-boa-draped arm vaguely in her direction, bearing papers.

"Yes," she replied, very cautiously.

Even she could see immediately that the lady before her on her doorstep was no ordinary customer.

Something's up, she's thinking to herself. Something funny's going on here. It's not just the canary yellow feather boa - there's something else. But what?

"Mrs Timms, I am here about your telephone."

Her face lit up. "My telephone?" She gushed breathlessly. "Is something wrong?" She probed. "You want to use it?" She stepped out, wanting to see and hear more.

"I've been sent by the Postmaster," I announce, magisterially. "There's a problem with your phone."

"A problem?" she squeaks. "With my *telephone*! With my telephone! What sort of a problem?" She backs away.

"Mrs Timms. I need to come inside... I'm from the Government." I said this conspiratorially, glancing ever so slightly over my shoulder. "I'll need to come in."

"Yes, of course, yes! Please! Come in!"

Pregnant with questions, she ushers me straight through to the forbidden formal lounge. I know exactly what chair I want: it's the big one that Uncle Harry doesn't allow anyone else to sit on. And it's right next to the lava lamp.

I do my best to sound blasé, but, "Oh, Mrs Timms," I gush. "What an unusual ornament."

"Yes," she agrees proudly. "We got it at Bradlows."

Feigning ignorance, I ask her if it actually works, and get instant gratification as she switches it on. She sits down opposite me, expectantly. I can't mess it up now; I've had her fooled so far. She doesn't know it's me, and the telephone story seems to be working. I remember to close my legs, then open my handbag and retrieve the document I'd been waving around on my way in.

"We have some rather unpleasant business to discuss, I'm afraid. The Postmaster is not happy with you at all." I glare at her, then I put the document down (it's actually one of my mother's accounts) and fish around in my handbag for my cigarettes and lighter. Out they come: gold cigarette box with mother-of-pearl inlay, dad's gold Dupont lighter. There's a bit of fumbling, then a flash, a puff of smoke, and I'm off.

"Oooh! Sorry!" She blusters. "I forgot to offer you a drink! I am so terribly sorry. Tea? Coffee?"

I smile graciously. "Why, yes. Thank you. I'll have a glass of wine."

Auntie Avril does a double-take. In the seventies, a house-caller might well light up a cigarette, particularly as there were ashtrays all around the room. But I can see that I've really got her thinking now. Maybe the wine was pushing it - but I'd thought initially that it would impress upon her the fact that I'm an adult - grown up: smoking, drinking... I glared back at her and blew a thin trail of smoke in her direction, as if to ask: "What the hell are you waiting for?" She thought better of whatever it was she'd been contemplating and left the room. In a flash, she was back,

and set a glass of white wine alongside me. Immediately, I took a sip and had to fight back facial contortions. Fortunately, the Timms's liked their wine very sweet.

Suddenly: "Brynn!" She squeaked. "I know it's you, man! I'm gonna tell your mother what you doing with her things. And smoking and drinking. Is it you?"

"Mrs Timms? What are you talking about? This isn't a joke, you know. You don't seem to realise the seriousness of your situation," I warned her – the words straight out of my schoolteachers' mouths.

"No," she intoned slowly, with doubt and disbelief. "I don't believe it..."

I interrupt. "Mrs Timms I have to take your phone back because you haven't paid this month." By now I'm being so convincing that I'm quite taken in myself.

Another squeak: "What? But my husband paid! I sent him to the Post Office last Saturday! Wait, I'll show you." In a flash she was off down the passage. I could hear drawers being opened and closed, and much fumbling with papers.

The cigarettes and wine were starting to take effect. I looked out languidly, across the yard, through the lace-curtained window, puckered my lips and took a puff of my cigarette as I gazed at the boys in the Brandwag Boys School cadet squad. They were parading out in the street between our houses, yet again. They seemed to favour our street – possibly because of all the trees and shade they brought. The boys were mostly my age, but from a different world entirely. I went to a private English school in the countryside; this was Brandwag, a state-run Afrikaans school.

Then I spotted Koosie, a lovely Aryan beauty, fourteen years old and made of pure muscle. Some time ago he'd approached me at the Children's Bioscope hosted by Uitenhage's Protea Theatre. It will always be a place of fond memories for me. I'd seen Star Wars there, and Saturday Night Fever. But I remember the time when I was standing near the fire exit, munching on sweets and he came over and said hello. I was immediately on guard; he was not only a "bigger boy", but also a very virile one, too, albeit with a baby face. I avoided "toughies" wherever I could. Being a pale, wispy boy I got teased or bullied – especially with my long hair and girly looks. Worst of all, he was Afrikaans – and my parents didn't want me, a good English boy, getting too friendly with the locals.

He asked if I minded him talking with me, and offered me some brightly coloured sweets, quite irresistible to a boy like me who could barely afford the popcorn on my limited pocket money. As I munched on the sticky, sweet toffee, he asked me to come outside with him. I stopped chewing for a second. Uh oh! I thought. This can only be trouble. Only the bigger boys – especially the rough ones – go out there with

their girlfriends, usually to kiss and smoke. None of us younger boys ever dared go out there. But he was insistent. He told me that he wanted to ask me something. Taking me by the hand, he led me out into the bright sunshine.

He squeezed my hand, moved closer to me, and said softly, "I want to ask you something?" I shrunk. Why was he holding my hand? I was tingling all over. I'd been blushing from the second he approached me. Boys don't hold hands. I giggled, then immediately grew serious as the possibility that this was some ghastly trap entered my head – they wanted to catch me out for being a naff. Was that it? No, I didn't think so. He was moving closer. Now he put a hand around my waist.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" he asked.

Boys can't have boyfriends! Confused, all I could do was giggle and smile, and say, "No!"

"Do you want one?" he persisted.

I didn't answer. This guy was making me feel like I was on fire. Could he be serious?

"Can I ask you something?" He was relentless. His tones steady, measured, respectful – even reverent, so I got the feeling that he was okay, and that nothing bad was about to happen.

"Okay," I agreed.

"Can I have a kiss?" Now he was blushing, too. I nearly collapsed in a spasm of giggles. But there was no avoiding him as he held my hips and started to move closer to me, eyes locked into mine, pinning me gently against the wall.

Our lips touched. My heart was beating so fast it felt like I was about to take off, or just float away in a flutter. He opened his eyes and moved back slightly, his blue eyes shining into mine. Then he moved back again as he realised I was spellbound, utterly entranced. This had never happened to me before, and it was way beyond my imaginings. There were other boy-girl couples scattered around, and down the untidy fire escape area. Many of them were doing the same. Kissing, giggling, smoking.

His tongue started to flicker at my lips. I could taste bubble gum. His lips were stained red from a sweet he'd been eating. As I started to relax and let go, I closed my eyes and let him do what he wanted with me.

A boy who made me swoon had given me sweets, asked me to be his boyfriend, and kissed me! There we were, two boys kissing right out in the open and nobody was saying or doing anything about it. There I was, being kissed by a boy, and finding myself liking it! Finding myself spellbound, swooning!

At some point, I was snapped out of my dream world as my younger cousin, Jamie, came bounding up with another boy his age. He was looking at me strangely, while his companion and my Koosie were rattling off in Afrikaans, which neither of us cousins

understood at that age.

Koosie turned to me. "Is he your cousin?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Why does he say that you are a boy?"

I giggle, rather more nervously than before. "I *am* a boy!" I exclaim, thinking he was joking. There was more babbling in Afrikaans.

"I'm so sorry!" he pleaded. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were a boy!"

I was horrified. He'd thought I was a *girl*. I had often been mistaken for one, but the situation had never gone as far as this. I felt ashamed and embarrassed. But *he* was begging *me* for forgiveness. Blaming himself. I kept telling him it was okay. Secretly hoping that somehow we could carry on doing what we had been doing. That he *would* be my boyfriend. Buy me sweets and kiss me. But there was to be none of that. After profuse apologies and some more sweets, he was off. We never spoke again, and I avoided him in case there'd be trouble, particularly as I got older.

All of these memories flashed through my mind as I sat at Auntie Avril's, watching him in the cadet band in the street, puffing away on my fag and sipping wine through a belipsticked mouth. If he could only see me now. Beneath Granny's gold dress, in my Star Trek undies, I felt a cool tingle. That funny "swoon" feeling passed through me again, snake-like. I fancied Koosie, but in a peculiar way that didn't fit the categories of understanding I had at my disposal at the age of twelve. This was alien territory for me. A secret, enchanted Kingdom where nothing could be named because, strictly speaking, nothing existed even in its own world.

This Kingdom owed its existence to its non-existence. Everything in the Kingdom was always something other than itself. Like my strange feelings for Koosie. Like my compulsion to wear Granny's beautiful clothes. And my even bigger compulsion to wear Mom's make-up. How many times had she caught me out now? How many times had I been threatened or punished? Initially, she could always tell when I'd been "playing" with her make-up because of the clumsy finger marks and evidence of digging in her beauty products. Now that I was getting older and smarter I left fewer tracks. But then, she'd spot the traces of mascara around my eyes. Or lip liner. There was always something. The threats, the insults – she'd called me a naff in nearly all the possible permutations. But all to no effect, as I felt irresistibly drawn to make up, jewellery, gowns, hand bags... the antithesis of what a twelve-year-old boy should be interested in.

What drew me even deeper in my fascination for "dressing up" was the fact that I was so damn good at it. This was no clumsy clown-lips game. Oh, no. I spent *hours* before the mirrors. Preening, trying dif-

ferent colours, endlessly fascinated. Each time learning a bit more. And the clothes and jewellery my grandmother had left us were stunning!

My head beginning to spin from the wine, I continued to gaze out into the street, past Auntie Avril's lava lamp, past the bougainvillea along the wall, the Barberton daisies, the ecstatic zinnias that smiled back at me cheerily from beside the garden path. Beyond the cadets lay my mother's garden. I could see her prized sweet peas, along with the sunflowers, the ranunculus and moonflowers.

The boys had completed the exercises they'd been busy with out in the street and were now preparing to march on. The band struck up a tune, the flag and colours were raised, and they marched away. The music faded as my thoughts returned to the present. I felt relieved that they'd finally moved on, making it possible for me to get back home across the road without being spotted or caught.

Auntie Avril returned excitedly with a sheath of papers – accounts, from what I could gather. One in particular became the object of her discourses as she tried to convince me the account had been paid in good time. Not impressed, I snatched the document away with a nasty air and thrust it into my sequinned handbag.

"Missus Timms," I pronounced. "The Post Office never makes mistakes. If we say you didn't pay, then that's the end of the story – you didn't pay. Now we are taking your phone back."

Sipping my wine, I told her coldly, cruelly and in no uncertain terms that they would only be able to get it back once the Superintendent had issued an order.

Throwing back the last of the golden liquid in the glass, I made a move toward the source of all the controversy. Her brand new telephone: grey, black circular dial, with a very large maroon handle – one with a mouthpiece that would extend way below my jaw when the earpiece was pressed to my ear.

"No!" she shrieked. "You can't take the phone!"

"Oh, yes, I can," I told her, heading for the instrument.

"But we did pay it. My husband pays all his accounts every month!"

"I am terribly sorry Mrs Timms. He will have to come and see me and the Postmaster in Mosel. In future, you must pay your accounts on time – *if* he gives you the phone back after this."

I yanked the telephone cable out of the wall and picked the instrument up, tucked it under my arm, and headed for the door, to a cacophony of protests and pleas from Auntie Avril.

A deft yank of the door and I was out on the porch. I was having a real battle, not only tipsy and high on nicotine, but struggling to focus through Granny's bifocal lenses. I'd got out there so quickly that Auntie Avril hadn't quite registered in time to

stop me. But as she started to gather her senses and saw the funny Post Office lady sway down the garden path with her new phone, she finally overcame her fear of authority and came out in hot pursuit.

"Hey! You must give me a receipt! You can't just take our phone!"

But I was off. As I approached the end of the garden path, it all caught up with me. The wine, the cigarettes, the feather boa, Auntie Avril falling for it, Koosie, the madness of it all. And at that moment, trying to stifle the hysterical laughter that had been building up ever since I'd arrived, my foot wedged on a section of broken paving and my sister's high heel shoe twisted beneath me. It was all over. In a second, I'd lost my balance and found myself lying in the zinnias, screaming with laughter, wrapped in a canary yellow feather boa with the telephone cable twisted around me.

"Brynn! I bloody-well knew it was you, man!

Now, gimme back my phone! You're bloody naughty, man! Dammit!"

As I tried to scramble away, she was onto me.

"I'm going to bloody hit you, you bugger. You think you can fool me." She wrestled her phone back and it was all over. "I'm gonna tell Uncle Harry so he can give you a damn good hiding when he comes home from work tonight. Does your mother know you wear her things?"

I was half-way across the road, still wracked with hysteria. I knew I'd had her fooled - enough to have gotten out of her front door with the precious telephone.

Back home, "SOS" playing in the background, I looked at myself in the mirror. I was beautiful, and I knew it. If only I was a girl. That funny swoon feeling snaked its way through me again. I puckered my lips and blew myself a kiss. If I'd been able to fool Auntie Avril, what about Koosie? ■

The Judges' Comments:

Michael Arditti: Set in South Africa in 1977, the story's subject is gender rather than racial tension. An effeminate boy wreaks havoc on his local community, first by inadvertently enticing a muscular Afrikaans schoolmate into an expression of desire and then by expertly impersonating a female Post Office employee come to recall a neighbour's telephone. The boy's insouciance is intoxicating and his antics are portrayed with both warmth and wit.

Ali Smith: The most vivid piece of story in the whole pile of entries by far. But your writing will be even more powerful and vivid - unstoppable, I'd say - if you'd just edit yourself a bit. [Editor's note: We've done some of that!] I love this. A shining story, inside a voice of real spirit.

48



Ben Barton

Locker-Room Adonis

Two dozen gods stood naked
 in full stone
I'd never been so glad
to be excluded to just
 be among them
unnoticed
I turned away
 and melted into the corner
not wanting to expose my dick
 still unripe
I never once looked directly
 NEVER
images flashed-in
from my peripheral vision
black patches, toned lines
 the nether V
all left to my imaginings and musings
set to re-emerge in the dark
 that boy
he was my Zeus
 a force of fire
acid tongue and gargantuan cock
 a deadly double dose
ready for him I poured
 myself out in libation
offering him
 the sweetest part of me

Chroma: Biographies

Ben Barton is an advertising copywriter from Folkestone. His first poetry collection *The Red Book* reached number one on the Amazon Hot Books poetry chart. See more at benbarton.co.uk.

Chris Beckett lives in London and works as a sugar trader. His poems appear in the *Rialto*, *Smiths Knoll*, *The North*, *Poetry London*, *Magma* and *Ambit*. His collection, *The Dog Who Thinks He's a Fish*, was published by *Smith/Doorstop* in 2004.

Brynn Binnell has an MA in Psychology and lives and works in London, where he is currently working on a book, short stories and does freelance writing. Work on IT projects keeps his feet on the ground and sustains his appetite for the finer things in life.

Ailbhe Darcy is from Dublin, where she recently co-edited and published *Watermarks*, a collection of writing and art by Irish students. Her poems have been published in a number of journals, including *The Wolf*, *The Stinging Fly*, *The Burning Bush*, *Labour of Love*, *Smoke* and *Novella*.

John Dixon has won a short story prize (*Bridport*) and has had several poems published. An extract from a novel was recently included in *Chroma*, Issue 4. He is currently working on a further novel.

András Gerevich recently moved back from London to Budapest, where he is president of the young writers association (JAK). He has published two volumes of poetry in his native Hungarian, and has work translated into English and published in journals and anthologies. He has translated *Seamus Heaney*, *James Joyce* and *Allan Ginsberg* into Hungarian.

Robert Hamberger has published two collections: *Warpaint Angel* (*Blackwater Press*, 1997) and *The Smug Bridegroom* (*Five Leaves*, 2002), which was chosen for the small press *Alternative Generation* promotion. His third collection *Torso* will be published by *Redbeck* in 2007, and *Heading North*, a pamphlet of poems about *John Clare*, is due to appear from *Flarestack*.

Nicki Hastie has been published in *Diva*, *Trouble & Strife* and critical anthologies on women's health, coming out stories, lesbian fiction, and representations of lesbians in popular culture. She is a founder member of *Woman-Stirred*, a collective blog with four US women showcasing lesbian and bi women's writing (woman-stirred.blogspot.com). A full list of publications can be found at nickihastie.demon.co.uk.

Joey Hateley is a Manchester-based theatre practitioner and Artistic Director of *TransAction Theatre Company*. *TransAction* collaborates with diverse artists to create experimental queer-feminist performance. *TransAction's* vision is to create "performance of the periphery" that continually responds to, and reflects the diversity within contemporary culture.

Louise Hercules' work appears in *Pride Magazine*, as well as in the anthologies *Brown Eyes: A Selection of Creative Expression* by *Black & Mixed Raced Women* (2005), *Brown Eyes II* (2007), *Celebrations* (*Forward Press*, 2005), and *A Bedtime Story for Every Day of the Year* (*Forward Press*, 2006). Louise regularly reads at *Shangwe* at *The Poetry Café*.

Crusader Hillis is Director of *Gasworks Arts Park* in Melbourne, and used to be Marketing Manager of Melbourne International Arts Festival. Over the past 15 years he has programmed over 150 spoken word events. He is co-owner, with *Rowland Thomson*, of *Hares & Hyenas* queer bookshop, and is the co-founder of Melbourne Queer Film Festival.

Kully Inges is a single Asian woman going through this deranged existence called "life" and examines its everything and illustrates her findings purely through the use of typographic visual poetry. For further information, and to receive an ebook, email her: Kully.Inges@googlemail.com

Alexandra Lazar dismayed fellow citizens of Belgrade, Budapest and Berlin before burning her etchings, moving to London and laying low as an art historian. Arrested only once, showcased in last two issues of *On Our Backs*, her corporate shop

front can be viewed at www.cyanworks.com

Helena Lukowska has written numerous reviews, interviews and articles for a variety of underground zines, but has never had anything published before. She is one half of the comedy, pop-punk duo *Jean Genet*. She plays records at underground queer club nights now and again.

Maitreyabandhu teaches meditation and Buddhism at the London Buddhist Centre. He has been ordained into the Western Buddhist Order for 16 years. He has published a book on friendship, and his exploration of Buddhism and the arts has attracted considerable media interest including TV, radio and national newspapers.

Char March is an award-winning writer – her credits include three poetry collections, six BBC radio plays and seven stage plays. Her poetry and short fiction are regularly published in lit-mags and anthologies. This story is an adapted chapter from her first novel, which she will complete early next year.

Stephen Mead is an artist and writer living in northeastern NY. The artwork in *Chroma* can be seen in his film "Blues in The Night" at youtube.com/user/stephenmead. Stephen also recently released a CD of love poems and music and an illustrated book of selected works via lulu.com/stephenmead.

P O'Loughlin was born in Ireland some time ago. He has lived in London for twenty one solid years. Read more of his work in *Magma*, Issue 35.

Stuart Sandford was born in Sheffield in 1978. He is a visual artist who has exhibited in the UK, Italy and Finland, and will take part in the *Florence Biennale 2007*.

Sinisa Savic is an artist/photographer. He recently took part in an experimental international art project, *Imagine.Art.After*, curated by *Breda Beban* (guardian.co.uk/imagineartafter). He will be exhibiting next year at *Tate Britain/Richmix* and *IMT Gallery*.

Gilles Sebban was born in 1967. He lives in Paris and teaches French literature. He has published three novels so far: *Haut Risque* (2003), *Presque Gentil* (2005) and *La Dette* (2006). He has just finished *Villa Alger*, a play adapted from his last novel.

David Shenton is a queer cartoonist, and has been for ages. He lives in Hackney and runs a comics website dscomics.co.uk.

Reginald Shepherd is a black gay American poet. He is the editor of *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries* (2004). His four volumes of poetry are *Otherhood* (2003), *Wrong* (1999), *Angel, Interrupted* (1996), and *Some Are Drowning* (1994), winner of the 1993 Associated Writing Programs' Award. His fifth collection, *Fata Morgana*, will be published in 2007.

George Szirtes is a Hungarian-born poet writing in English, as well as a translator from Hungarian into English. He won the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2004 for his book, *Reel*. See more at georgeszirtes.co.uk.

Michael Wilce is a London-based photographer. See more at michaelwilce.com.

Ronaldo Wilson is co-founder of the *Black Took Collective*. His poetry and prose appear most recently in *Beyond the Frontier: African American Poetry for the 21st Century*, *Corpus*, *Fence*, *Harvard Review*, *Interim*, *Nocturnes* (re)view of the *Literary Arts* and *Provincetown Arts*. He has held residencies at the *Fine Arts Work Center* in *Provincetown*, *Cave Canem*, *Squaw Valley*, the *Vermont Studio Center* and with *NEA's WritersCorps*.

Frank Wynne is a writer and award-winning literary translator. Together with *Michel Houellebecq*, he won the 2002 *IMPAC Award* for his translation of *Les Particules élémentaires* (*Atomised*), and the 2005 *Independent Foreign Fiction Award* for his translation of *Frédéric Beigbeder's Windows on the World*. He has translated works by *Philippe Besson*, *Pierre Mérot*, *André Comte-Sponville*, and the Ivorian novelist *Ahmadou Kourouma*.

Look Into It ...



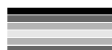
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I didn't, and still don't know Erik very well. In truth, I'm scared of knowing her very well, though I can see we have stuff in common, and whenever I talk to her I'm glad of it. I guess I'm scared that if we get too close she'd bring home to me my own hypocrisy, because pisshead and sex-fiend as Erik is, she still lives revolution, whereas I just think about it. I think Erik's a lot like I would be if I was less selfish, had more guts and strength of conviction and whatever the opposite of laziness is.

(from Helena Lukowska's "Eva")

**Ben Barton
Chris Beckett
Brynn Binnell
Ailbhe Darcy
John Dixon
Andras Gerevich
Robert Hamberger
Nicki Hastie
Joey Hateley
Louise Hercules
Crusader Hillis
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